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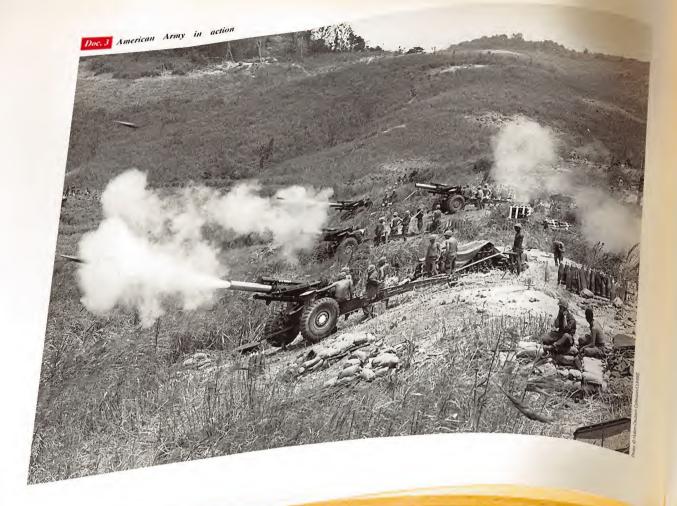


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JULY 2004 ISSUE 101

REGULARS

10 Inbox

Your words of wisdom

12 Insight

Industry news and analysis

24 Hotware

Cool and crazy gadgets

26 Out to Play

By Timothy C. Best

28 Tech Talk

By Stuart Calvin

30 The Guerilla Gamer

By Anonymous

32 Developer Diary

Talkin' STALKER

101 Decrypt

Jargon unjargonised

102 The Beast

The ultimate gaming PC

104 The Hub

Online gaming news

110 The Interview

Industry types speak

112 Disc Guide

What's on the discs?

114 Yellow Boots

Our roving reporter

GAMES IN REVIEW

68

The latest titles we've installed

69 Painkiller

72 Manhunt

74 Hitman: Contracts

76 Final Fantasy XI

78 Battle Mages

79 Lords of the Realm III

80 Sacred

81 Dead Man's Hand

82 IL-2 Ace Expansion

83 Gangland

84 Kasparov's Chessmate



85 CSI: Dark Motives 86 Highway to the Reich 87 Geneforge 2

TECH IN REVIEW

88

The silicon state of the art

89 MSI XA52P SATA Optical drive

89 MSI DR8-A1 DVD Rewriter

90 Prescott vs Northwood

91 TFT Monitor shootout -BenQ vs Solarism

92 Gigabyte GN-SLBZ201

92 Netgear MP101

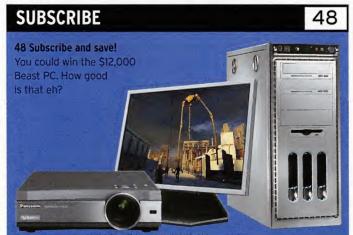
94 DVICO FusionHDTV tuner

94 Creaive MuVo Slim

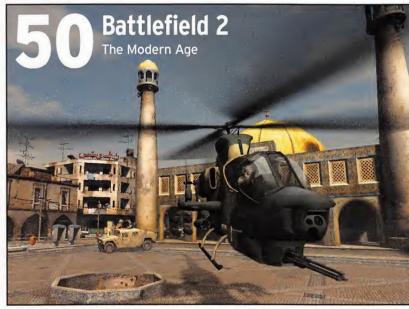
96 Dell Inspiron 9100

98 ASUS P4R800-V Deluxe

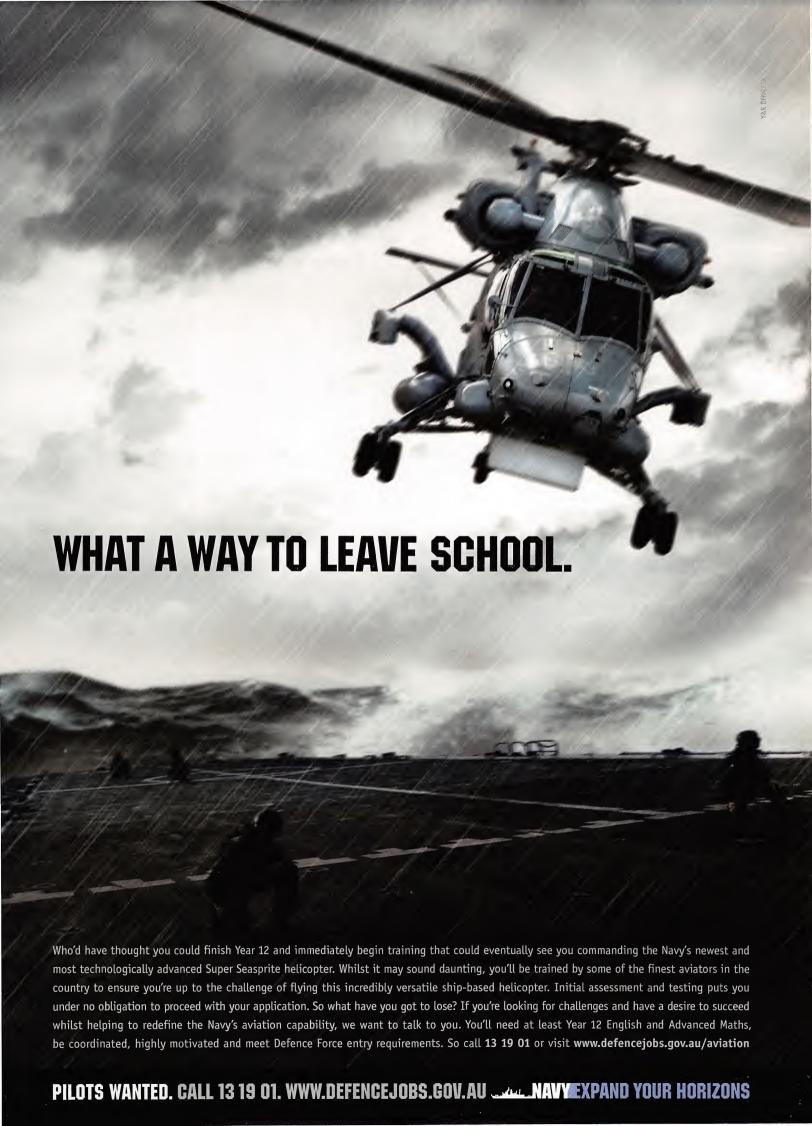












Editorial

A long way to the top



Now in its fifth year, the annual Top 100 countdown has become something of a PowerPlay institution. It is twelve pages an editor (and lucky contributing writer) can rely on each year. It is a feature guaranteed to stir up some controversy on the letters page and in the forums. It is also not a bad way to sell a few extra copies of the magazine - big numbers on the cover tend to have that effect, you see.

Yet those factors are mere fringe benefits. The real reason why we devote so much space in the magazine and put so much effort towards compiling the list is because we think it is important. The PCPP Top 100 is a crucial barometer of how we - as a magazine - view the PC games we play.

For me, the countdown has several key purposes. One, it should serve as a comprehensive overview of the current state of the art in PC gaming, thus allowing new readers the chance to swiftly get up to speed on the very best (and most historically significant) titles our treasured format has to offer. If you're seeking advice on where to start with PC gaming then, believe me, the Top 100 is the best place to start.

Two, the list should give more experienced gamers a gentle reminder of some classic titles they may have missed out on. We want regular readers to come away from the issue thinking. "Oh yeah, I've always meant to check out Jagged Alliance 2, I'll see if I can pick it up cheap on Ebay right now...

Three, there's the nostalgia factor as you flick through the pages towards top spot, quietly hoping your personal favourite gets the accolade it so thoroughly deserves. This is also where the controversy enters the equation with predictable timing and vitriol -"How could you not have Warcraft 3 in the top ten?!" writes Apoplectic, Townsville. We love reading these emails, so please don't hesitate to get

very angry indeed.

Four, it's always a good read, thanks to our talented and witty team of freelance writers. Whether it's John Dewhurst and the Sydney Games in 2000, Anthony's Big Brother riff a couple of years back or Tim's take on the Queer Eye phenomenon this time, the carefully selected theme helps elevate a potentially dry list into something guaranteed to raise a smile. (Special kudos this year to Amos for his ingenious illustrations.)

Lastly, the PCPP Top 100 gives you all a valuable insight into what we look for and appreciate in a game. More than anything, it's a clear, annual statement of our reviewing policy. So when you read a PowerPlay review during the rest of the year you'll know exactly where we're coming from when we decide to praise a game or lay the boot in.

Bearing that last point in mind, you're probably wondering how come the final list isn't ranked according to our review scores over the years? Tim does a pretty good job of explaining the reason why in his column on page 26, but I'd like to add a few details here, too.

When we review a game here at PCPP, we ensure the reviewer

appreciates the genre in question. Eliot knows his THACOs from his saving throws, for example, so he gets the RPGs, while Bennett's pilot experience puts him in the best position to tackle flight sims. We all have our own personal preferences and accumulated knowledge that we bring to bear on the Top 100.

One of the biggest issues of compiling the list is trying to compare two titles of radically different genres is Civ 3 better than Deus Ex? Does Warcraft wail on Counter-Strike? Quake or KOTOR, anyone?

In answering these questions we must necessarily fall back on our personal preferences. While recognising that perhaps Civ 3 does what it does better than Deus Ex does what it does, if you follow, we also factor in that more of us like Deus Ex than Civ when determining the final placings.

Hence the decision to crown (Snip! -Spoiler Alerting Ed) as our 2004 Top 100 #1. Not only is it recognised throughout the PCPP team as the best in its chosen genre, but we all have a soft spot for the genre in question. So after many arguments and even a little rational debate, in the end the choice was straightforward: what's the best game in our favourite genre? There's your number one. And nothing encapsulates PC PowerPlay better than that.

David Wildgoose,

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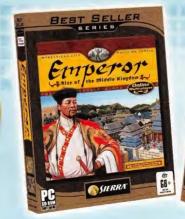








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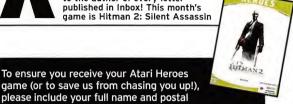


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Atari is offering a free Heroes game to the author of every letter published in Inbox! This month's game is Hitman 2: Silent Assassin

To ensure you receive your Atari Heroes

address with every letter or email you send. Thanks!



YOUR LUST

Gaming is ironically a dangerous game. You buy one and soon you need another, but still it's not enough to settle your lust for chaotic virtual rampage because the game ENDS! I want to see a game that doesn't end, is still as interesting as it could be when one first plays it and where replayability has still got 'it' up its sleeve. 'lt' being the excitement that never seems to end until the game has been completed.



Freelancer is an example of a great game that sparked my interest; I thought Freelancer was absolutely brilliant - I couldn't get over how great the storyline was and how the gameplay was fantastic. Freelancer was one of the best games I've ever played because it gave choice and time for you to do what you wanted before continuing on with the story. Deus Ex was quite in the same equation but it ended. Even though Freelancer didn't end after the story did, it became nothing but just short of a boring/repetitive game. To look at it in reality I suppose that such things can only be referred to as classics, though I still await a game that can offer me a singleplayer adventure that doesn't become boring or repetitive and isn't multiplayer- all of which can be enjoyed without drugs.

Matt Hall

Civ, Tetris, Quake 3, Champ Man - all games that fit the bill with near endless replayability. Personally though, I'd like to see a modern reinvention of Nethack...

COOL **CHAINSAWS**

One little line from PCPP#99 compelled me to try and type this whilst wiping away tears and stop giggling like a girl ("Let the player fight Hitler in a powersuit, if appropriate," p51.) 1 remember it being 3am many many moons ago on a school night just after my Dad had quietly noted I should probably go to bed. In a pitch black room I sat with my face glued to our computer screen, l even remember having 67% health and 3 ammo. Hitler appears on the screen in a huge friggin' suit. I stare blankly at the screen and get blown away immediately. A huge idiot grin spread across my face. I love that grin. You get all warm and fuzzy on the inside and no matter how hard you try, you can't wipe it off your face.

In gaming in particular, I've had quite a few moments where that grin has been plastered on my ugly mug. (I promise this is getting somewhere!) First was



Wolfenstein when Hitler stepped out & I got splattered. Next was when my Dad showed me how cool chainsaws were in this game called Doom. Licker in Resident Evil. Having your

Sim wet his pants in Sims. Finally finishing In Cold Blood. And pressing 'new game' for the first time on Grand Theft Auto 3. After those (obviously not in chronological order), the opening sequence to MoH -Frontline, using bullet time in Max Payne, discovering the burnout button in Driver, using rewind feature in Prince of Persia, looking out across the ocean in Far Cry and anything in Half-Life. After reflecting on all those grand moments in gaming history, one has to question: Is it coming to an end? Or at least slowing to a crawl? It seems that now, we are being swamped weekly with new games that have nothing to make them remotely

attractive. Games are seemingly being made, for the sake of making games. I'm beginning to wonder if these people are making games with only one or two good points because it's too hard/costly to research and program. What other reason could they have? I want games that give that grin for hours or at least time and again throughout my 4 hr stints every night. Quite simply, clean up your act guys. I'd rather pay \$150 (& have more respect) for a game that has been three years in the making.

Who's in charge of

Paul M

our website?

Hey look at the

ute monkey!

SNIPPETS

great gameplay, ok-ish visuals, well researched and gives some form of playing longevity, than pay \$76 and

get four hours of crap. When will the tide turn? Luke Noble

You sound like a jaded old games journo, Luke. As

games have become bigger

business, a natural conservatism has crept into the industry. But it would foolish to think games were better in the past or that there were once fewer unimaginative clones. Take off those rose-tinted glasses!

STRANGE

Searching Humanoid brainwave patterns: Intelligence Found: intelligence traced to "PC" or "Computer" Accessing Humanoid Global Communication system Searching.. Found: PC Powerplay

Identification in progress... Identification finished ldentified: Humanoid Magazine that has a strange affinity with aforementioned PCs. Is strangely obsessed with how certainly lit pixels arrange themselves on a screen, and how aforementioned arrangement of said pixels on said screen can be altered with the manipulation of a rectangular block and oval shaped moving thing. Seems to be an odd habit of adding "tastic" to every second word. Found, instructions on how to create a "PC" or

"Computer", SNIPPETS I completely agree with Terry Adam's letter in #99. Tom Finlay

What, you liked

FAKK2, too?

although the "PC" "Beast" is under accsessorised, I mean, where is the case modding and the DV Hardware and the Hardcore cooling system and the flubber. Nahey. End Study There is no hope for humanity at all

Josiah Miller

Indeed, I think you may

well be right.



JOHN ROMERO

On satellite TV, there's a channel called NOW TV that features video games shows regularly. The other day they had a feature on John Romero and how he met his girlfriend/wife in a Quake competition. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry!

Cuong

Laugh until you cry. We did.

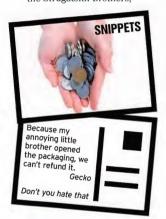
ADD MORE GUNS

Alexei Sytyanov is perhaps being a little disingenuous when he states that the inspiration for STALKER arose from Chernobyl, from "the idea of a neglected exclusion zone, a man-made hell where survival is everything" (PCPP#99). As

many people are no doubt aware, there is a far more immediate and obvious source of inspiration: Tarkovskii's Soviet Russian cinematic masterpiece, also titled 'Stalker', in which mercenaries known



as stalkers illegally enter the dangerous and anomaly-riddled Zone in order to retrieve valuable artefacts left behind by aliens. This film is in turn based on the story 'Roadside Picnic' by the Strugatskii Brothers,



FROM THE FORUMS

Subject: Weapons in games

I'm curious why this has never been mentioned before. As far as I know every weapon ever seen in a game is patented and copyrighted as each company's intellectual property, yet games use every style of realistic weapon including their names and calibre. We have been seeing product placement often enough in games, so if the developers of these games aren't paying a license fee to the weapon manufacturers, are the guns advertising?

Highlandish, Tiefling

They can use the likeness of the guns and slap on a creative new name no problem. The first Hitman game got IO in trouble because they used unlicensed gun names. I don't think that gun companines are too serious about it yet, other we'd have them cracking down just about everything. I remember Soldier of Fortune 2 had licensed weapons, not like they could get away without it being based on a gun-nut magazine.

Arach, Dungeon Keeper

If developers are going to go down the road of product placement and sponsorship, I want to see \$10 or \$20 shaved off the price of a new release game. If they are getting some phat cash for it, I want some prices dropped a little for the consumer as compensation.

Right! Like that's going to happen!

Arkanis50, Grunt

What about Nerf Arena Blast?
Tagg, Guardian

It's interesting to note that there's an E3 conference session where people like Tim Willits from id Software are going be talking about opportunities for advertising using in-game assets.

Veefy, Duke

Fantastic. I can't wait to play 'The Next Big Thing' and use my Coca-Cola sword of hipness +2 and shoot demonic minions proudly brought to me by McDonalds.

Billy, Hitman

arguably the best Russian science fiction authors. Substitute nuclear disaster for aliens, add more guns, and there's your game premise. I don't quite understand why Sytvanov is determined to take credit for the Stalker concept, but if he delivers on even half the promises he's made to us, he'll have pulled off a world first: great book, great film, and great computer game. (Don't even think about mentioning Lord of the Rings here.) In that case, I'm prepared to forgive him anything.

Jeremy Dwyer

Oh well, at least Sytyanov isn't a fan of WWII films.

EGA/VGA COLOUR

I recently visited the Track Mania website and read, "Original, fresh, innovative, TrackMania is more than just a simple car game." l hardly agree on "original" and "fresh". If you remember the game "Stunt Driver" from Spectrum Holobyte Inc. (1990) that was the real original (yep you do the exactly same thing as Track Mania in EGA/VGA colour and all in polygons). Damn it, they just copied the whole thing and put in real 3D, changed the cars and called it ORIGINAL, c'mon... what happened to copyrights? It's sad... cuz I enjoyed Stunt



Driver... <sigh>
Geoffrey Hong

At least give them credit for not making a WWII shooter.

HELL BENT

Can PC PowerPlay explain the three most important questions man has ever had? 1. Why are Linux people so evil and why do they hate windows and why are they hell bent on world domination. Also why is the penguin there great symbol of evil?

2. Is there a solution to sweat covered computer mouses?
3. Here is my most important question will you publish this letter and give me a free Atari Heroes game?

Anthony Smith

But that was four questions.

THE HILARIOUS WORLD OF HUGH BURTON!

I recently got robbed and my computer that I had spent a few thousand on is missing. I had modded the case to hell and it had sat on top of the rear projection TV with pride. I had recently won a bit in the lotto and being a single guy and not having much to do, I purchased the beast. That's right, PCPP#97's Beast, But because my computer was modded, overclocked and better than anything a shop could sell, the insurance couldn't cover it and now I am stuck playing Halo on my Xbox while the insurance company tries to figure out what they don't have to cover. Anyway, in there were some really hard to get games, like Elite, Master of Orion and Tribes. Life sucks.

Hugh Burton

Please don't think I'm nuts, but I was reading the preview of STALKER and I thought to myself, "That sounds like a great idea for an MMORPG". Seriously. You are a stalker, and so are thousands of other people in the zone. You trade items you find for money, you use the money to upgrade your character (or in my case, buy a really, REALLY big gun), go exploring in the wasteland to complete quests given to you by NPCs, almost finish the quest when another stalker beats you up and leaves you for dead, so he can finish the quest and get the reward. Or you could beat up someone and finish the quest. It all sounds great. Sure the graphics would have to be toned down a bit so people could play it without being in lag hell, and the game world would have to be so much bigger, so the developers would spend much more time on it. But it would still

be released before Duke Nukem Forever. And it wouldn't be able to have a subscription fee, so I could afford to play it. But I think it's a good idea (after all, I did come up with it).

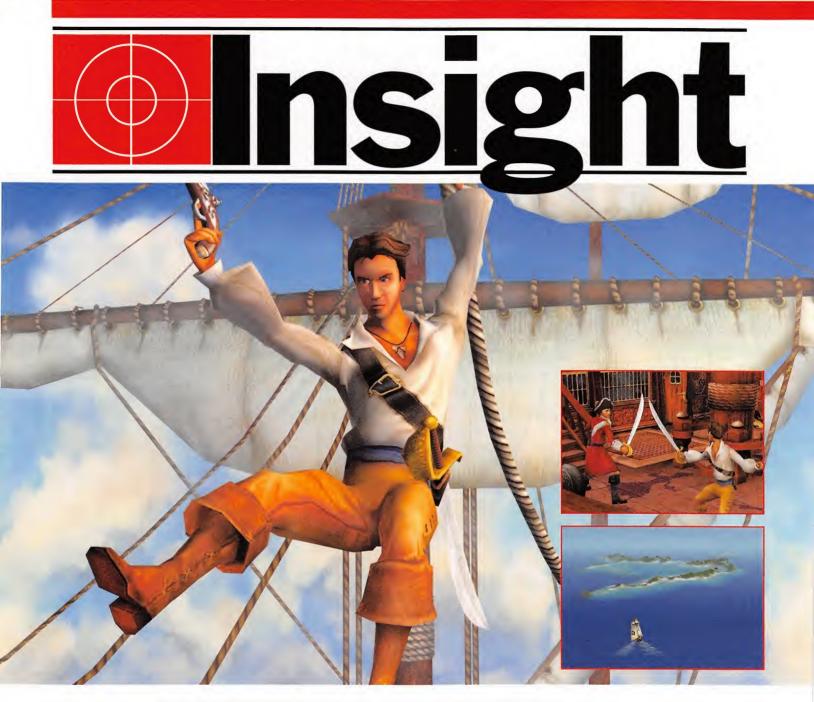
Hugh Burton

I would like to thank Warren Spector for giving me a very, very good chance to insult his once proud company, when he released that circular interfaced piece of diseased monkey faeces known commonly as Deus Ex-Invisible War. I loaded it up on my computer (Athlon 64 3200+, GeCube Radeon 9800 XT, 1 gig Corsair DDR), and was disturbed to find that even with AA turned off, it still gave me hell with frame rates, topping at ten, often less than two. The patch does nothing to fix this, despite making the shotgun explosion a strange blue color, and removing most areas I can step into

without falling into a hole that I can't get out of. And the interface is circular. This is obviously a moderation Ion Storm put in after they decided to make an Xbox game, and then adapt it for computer. I guess Mr. Spector didn't realise that most computer monitors are rectangular (Hmm, just think about that one for a sec - Ed). I also can't believe he ditched the lockpick. I mean, a multitool opening locks, it ain't right. I'm not going to mention the ammo, as the magazine would have to censor it. Anyway, Warren Spector sucks because Deus Ex 2 is a console sellout with a shitty interface and no reloading. I hope he falls in one of the invisible holes and dies of sleep depravation.

Hugh Burton

Stay tuned for more of the Hilarious World of Hugh Burton next issue!



DO YOU WANNA BE A PIRATE?

Sid Meier pillages his own past in this peglegged remake. Timothy C. Best cries "Arrrr!"

ong before Grand Theft Auto we had the action and mayhem of Grand Theft Naval. Fifteen years ago Sid Meier's Pirates! offered up the open-ended gameplay, the hand-to-hand combat and the chance to jack other people's rides that made GTA3 famous.

Beyond that it also let you sail around gathering treasure, fighting ship-to-ship, raiding port-towns, assembling a fleet and even taking part in mini-games like the sword-fighting that could swing a boarding manoeuvre from failure to success. Most of this was handled from a simple isometric view with sword-fighting coming to life with incredibly basic 2D sprites.

It might not have been Doom 3 but it let Sid create a massive world and left players plenty of room to fill in the gaps with their imagination. This time around Meier is aiming to recapture the scale and freedom of the original while adding the liveliness of 3D.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Meier says that during duels players will see their battle in the foreground, with the background filled with crew-versuscrew action.

"If you go into a ship battle you can actually see your sails damaged, fire breaking out on the other ship, the wakes of the ships as they turn and crewmen flying off of the deck – so that's all brought to life with a lot of detail when we get into the action sequences," he adds.

Besides making everything look pretty the 3D graphics serve another master: making a game that feels like a pirate movie. Hordes of games have aimed for cinematic gameplay but Pirates! is boarding the notion and hijacking it. We're not just talking moody cut-scenes but a huge free-form game that borrows its pacing from film.

Meier explains: "It's not traditional adventure where you walk from point A to point B and then having to do everything explicitly. Taking a movie approach we move you from scene to scene."













ACTION AND ADVENTURE

Besides the ship-to-ship battles and the sword-fighting, the new iteration of Pirates! will encompass new minigames ranging from dancing to skulking.

The sword-fighting sequences will have controls for block and parry as well as special moves that will send players swinging from ropes or battling up and down stair cases. The dancing will be handled like a rhythm-based game as player try to woo the governor's daughter with his 17th century dance moves, while the stealth elements will not only help players get out of romantic entanglements, but will also come in handy for jail breaks and secret missions into enemy ports. We're not sure if there will be enough mini-games to sustain the game but it sure looks like Meier is giving it a good shake.



For example, if you are sailing the seas everything skips along quickly until a choice comes up or something dramatic happens – there's no endless wandering back and forth between points here. The mini-games act like the action and adventure scenes that give your tale oomph.

Open Seas

With this movie-like approach you might make the mistake of thinking that the game will be scripted, but that's really not the case. One of the strengths of the first game was that you could start with one objective in mind and then you could shift focus half way through and pursue a whole new set of goals and the Pirates! crew is trying to capture that same feel with the sequel.

Players can try to seduce governor's daughters from port to port, they can try to gain medals and ranks of honour from various countries, start wars, pillage fortified towns, solve the mysteries, look for lost cities full of gold or take on the other pirates to be the king of the seas... and they can flow between any of these open-ended goals to be whatever pirate they want to be.

A host of larger-that-life characters will help keep characters motivated but, if Firaxis manages to pull it off, the real magic ingredient will be the reactive world designed to keep players on centre stage.

"When you go into the taverns, the characters will know about your most recent adventures and will congratulate you on what you've done," Meier says.

"If you've been annoying a certain town they will send out pirate hunters to chase you away. You can intercept valuable missions, perhaps a peace treaty is about to be signed between the English and the Spanish and you can intercept that before it gets to its destination and that peace treaty will not be signed. You can have a real impact on the world as a whole based on your piratical activities."

Final Destination

As the game progresses characters develop their crew and pick up special items like armoured vests to help them in sword fights, looking glasses that let them see farther at sea, special sails to give their ships an edge in speed or new cannons that pack more punch. In addition to that, of course, there are also maps, and governors daughters, to be found among the other treasures.

"I think, at its heart, it's an adventure game, with fun action sequences fairly frequently throughout and a very openended world where you get to decide where the story goes," concludes Meier.

Batten your hatches, Pirates! should be hitting a port near you by year's end.







THE WIZARDS OF IF

Gaming's forgotten grandfather lives on, in the hearts of an online community. Anthony Fordham searches for the correct verb...

Y ou are standing in a computer games shop. On the shelves are dozens of gaudily-coloured boxes, each screaming for your attention. A seedy-looking attendant slumps behind the counter, idly picking his nose.

>APPROACH COUNTER

You move over to the counter. The seedy-looking attendant flicks an eyelid at you, but otherwise doesn't move. A bunch of little kids run screaming into the shop and start fighting over the Spawn action figures on the back wall.

>ASK ATTENDANT ABOUT ZORK

The attendant sighs and hauls himself upright. He pokes at the keyboard of his catalogue machine. The machine bleeps sadly. The attendant shakes his head. "We don't have it," he says. "What is it anyway?" >TELL ATTENDANT ABOUT ZORK



As you begin to explain to the attendant that Zork is one of the greatest games ever, a text adventure beyond compare, he looks more and more horrified. When you get to the part about how Zork not only has no graphics, but also needs no graphics, he becomes agitated. "I think you better go man," he says, "you're scaring the children."

>LEAVE SHOP

Not all of our readers will be old enough to know what's going here. To them, the idea of a game without graphics is little more than a footnote in a poorly-defined and rarely recorded history. But once, games were all about text. And for a select few scattered across the world, they still are.

Each year, two usenet groups rec.games.int-fiction and rec.arts.intfiction - run a competition to see who can produce the most transcendent piece of text adventure gaming. They call it Interactive Fiction, because often these so-called adventures aren't adventures at all. Some focus entirely on interaction with a single NPC. Others are little more than interactive landscapes, where a story may or may not emerge from the cries of lonely gulls. Or something poetic like that anyway because IF gaming is as far removed from the world of chainguns and exploding zombie brains as it's possible to get.

All these games are free. Using one of several interpreters (also free), or running in a browser window, gamers can

download and enjoy hundreds of text adventures which range from the moronically simple to the blisteringly hard.

There are several different common formats for the games to run in, but one of the most popular is Z-Code, an emulation of the games from IF's heyday - the age of Infocom. Infocom produced such classics as The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, a game where knowing every intimate detail of the books did very little to help you solve its insane puzzles.

Z-Code games are written in various scripting languages, but two of the most popular are Inform and TADS. If you know Java or any other OOP language, programming a piece of IF is child's play. Even if you don't, Inform (free) comes with an excellent beginner's guide (also free). Check it out at inform-fiction.org.

Intellectual powerhouses from around the world have bent their minds to the pursuit of IF. In fact, the genre was pioneered on the home PC by one of the greats of gaming history. Scott Adams is credited as being the first person to sell a game commercially for a home computer.

"I programmed my adventure game-called Adventure - on the TRS-80. It wasn't my first computer, but it was the first computer I ever had that I didn't have to build myself. It had a copy of Microsoft BASIC in it, which was a new language for me. The language had a string capability to allow it to easily handle text. I decided to write a game that used English text," says Adams.

Runescape

■ Developer: Jagex ■ Genre: Web Based MMORPG ■ URL: http://runescape.com/

Playing web based games used to be a matter of choosing between Blackjack or Chinese Checkers, however the arrival of mass market broadband and an improvement in operating systems has allowed them to blossom into a unique genre in their own right.

Jagex are a small UK based independent company that has specialised in web games since they began operations in December 2001. Andrew Gower, Paul Gower and Constant Tedder founded the company as a commercial operation to take over the running of the original RuneScape, which had been solely developed by Andrew Gower. By that stage the game had over one million

accounts, all free to play, and the main job of the new company was to figure out a way to make it all pay off. They did this by introducing a membership system which gave paid members access to a lot more game content in the form of items, quests and events.

The original was a hybrid 2D/3D system playing from a very small browser window. Recently the company launched Runescape 2 which has taken the game several levels beyond the original. The sequel was renamed Runescape when it was launched and the original game, which is also still going strong, is now Runescape Classic. The new version adds so many features it's







HOW NOT TO WRITE IF

So, has this article got you inspired to run out and start coding? Want to enter your piece in the IFComp2004? Make sure you don't fall in to any of the following traps:

1. Don't start the game in someone's bedroom, with the hero waking up, having a shower, getting dressed etc. Sure, it's a logical place to start, but apparently, IF veterans hate this.

- 2. Don't set your game in a post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland, and above all don't have a Geiger counter as a central prop. Everyone does this. Everyone.
- 3. It's almost impossible to include a magical ring in an IF game without it subsequently degenerating into a bad Lord of the Rings ripoff. Your game will become infested with Hobbits, even if you didn't code any.
- 4. Don't forget to code reactions for "fart", "look down", "look up" and "exits" to display available exits. There are people out there who, on loading a game, will test all of these in quick succession and bin your game if any of them don't work.
- 5. Don't mention an object in a room and then forget to code it in for the player to look at. "The key has a small wooden stub. >LOOK AT STUB. You can't see any such thing. >LOOK AT KEY. The key has a small wooden stub." Scream.

At work, Adams had access to a copy of Colossal Caves, a text adventure that ran on a DEC mainframe. He says he used to go in to work early for weeks to finish the game.

From humble beginnings, great things grow. Adams sold his games on tape, and when asked to provide packaging for the tapes, initially used the liners from his baby daughter's disposable bottles. Eventually, one of his distributors Ken Williams decided to strike out on his own. His wife Roberta had written a few simple graphical adventures. They formed a little company you may have heard of - Sierra.

The point here is that IFers were around at the very dawn of the gaming age, and they're still around today. Unlike us, they can run their games on early 90s technology and they don't have to spend \$800 every 18 months on a new videocard.

Eric Mayer is a published author who writes historical whodunnits. He says he writes IF today because he is fascinated with the interactivity the format offers.

"Obviously I enjoy the writing process,

but IF allows me to tell a story differently to the way I would tell it in a book. In some ways it's easier to create a world and let the reader walk through, decide what order to look at things, rather than me having to control all of that," he says.

Associate Professor of English at Seton Hill University in Pennsylvania, US, Dennis Jerz, lectures on interactive fiction, and sees the format as an important part of not just gaming, but also literature.

"An IF game requires the player to combine the textual analysis skills of a literary critic with the problem-solving drive of a hacker," he says.

Jerz currently uses IF to illustrate various points in his English classes in the US.

"IF dates from a time when most PC users were programmers. My students find it a challenge to think of writing as populating a database. You have to write the words that describe a physical setting in one place, then put in a different place the words that describe an action that may occur in that room," he says.

WIN!

Send your entries to: Oh the Pain?

PC PowerPlay 78 Renwick St

5 COPIES OF PAINKIL PAINKILLER

Reviving memories of id Software's classic DOOM, Painkiller is a searingly orthodox bloodfest of seat-of-the-pants shooter action. It's no-frills yet high-octane gaming goodness with just enough smarts and tricks to keep you coming back for more. It is, to spoil the surprise, our game of the month this issue. So thanks to QV Software, we have FIVE copies to give away to the lucky readers who can answer the following question of the back of an envelope...

Q. Name two gaming "heroes" who use painkillers to replenish health?

Of course, IF isn't just for gamers. It's primarily for authors. It's probably the easiest way to design a game, and in fact some developers use IF scripting languages to prototype adventure games. You can easily see if your puzzles work before you need to spend thousands on storyboarding and concept art.

If IF sounds like your thing, the best way to start is to read the usenet groups: rec.arts.int-fiction for authors and rec.games.int-fiction for gamers. Some good scripting languages include TADS (www.tads.org), Inform (www.inform-fiction.org) and ADRIFT for people who hate coding (www.adrift.org.uk). You can find pots and pots of games at the IF Archive (www.ifarchive.org).

>ENTER SHOP

You re-enter the shop. The attendant looks up from picking at his scabs. "What do you want?" he demands.

>PUNCH ATTENDANT.

The attendant goes down under a hail of fists. The kids with the Spawn action figures cheer.

res cneer. *** YOU HAVE WON ***





impossible to mention even a tenth of them here. The whole game world is rendered in 3D, albeit cute little Java 3D. The detail in the game is now on a par with the most other 3D MMORPGs in terms of the variety of activities available to the player. Crafting and smithing are a big part of the game and the interface to use them has been improved to a one-click system. New guilds have been added, a better currency system, and an extensive emote system (extensive enough to be used for a 'breakdancing' contest by one creative player). A browse through the game's forums will show you that this is a very lively online world, Runescape has over 70,000 individual players (the company claims 600,000 but that is probably the total number of people who have ever signed up rather than the number actually playing). No matter what time you log in there are always plenty of people on the twelve US or sole UK and Canadian servers. Sure, none of them are what you could call 'local' but because this is a

Java based game and the data transfer required is minimal, lag isn't much of an issue.

The design of Runescape has been molded to encourage a lot of social activity within the game. Players can create and run their own events for other players, such as the previously mentioned 'breakdancing' contest. Player vs player combat is handled in a fun, positive way; you can often see players whaling away at each other without any recriminations afterwards. There is even a dueling arena to formalise the fighting and give prizes to the top duelists.

The best thing about Runescape though is the price: free! About a third of the game's content is available as soon as you finish the simple sign-up procedure and create your character. If you want more a \$US5 a month fee will get you some new abilities, activities, quests and monsters. Things like Fletching, Dueling and Thieving become available, and the small banner ads disappear. - George Soropos



SECTS AND THE CITY

Pocketing the latest word on Thief: Deadly Shadows

It's been an interesting few weeks at Ion Storm. First Harvey Smith, the project lead on Deus Ex: Invisible War, left the Texas studio then his namesake Randy Smith, project lead on Thief: Deadly Shadows, followed suit.

Although both departures are certainly amicable, we decided to seek reassurance that Garrett's third stealth adventure was still on track for a midyear release. We also managed to extract some more details on the game from Ion Storm's studio director, Warren Spector. With a blade to his throat, he was more than willing to come clean...

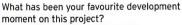
What can you tell us about the story behind Thief: Deadly Shadows?

Deadly Shadows completes the first Thief trilogy, begun by Looking Glass back in 1998. That first game introduced Garrett, the cynical, loner thief to PC gamers. Now, we get to reintroduce him to the PC folks and bring him to a whole new audience of console gamers. To answer your question more specifically, the world of Thief is dominated by three factions - Pagans, Hammerites and Keepers - each with its own take on how the people of The City, where all the games are set, should live their lives. The first game in the series was, basically, a Pagan story; the second, a Hammer story; and the third, if you haven't already guessed, tells a Keeper story.

Still want more detail? Well, let's just say this: a mysterious Keeper prophecy describes a "Brethren and Betrayer" who will bring about



feature. I'm most excited about the ways in which Thief takes advantage of Ion's core technology - the real-time, dynamic lighting, the volumetric shadows, the Havok physics engine (and the physics-driven sound!), the audio propagation model, the responsive AI and the maps, all nicely tuned for stealth gameplay... Everything adds up to create a really atmospheric, highly dynamic playground for players. Thief: Deadly Shadows doesn't play like any other game out there.



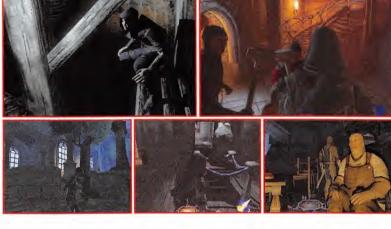
There are lots of magic moments in development (some of them Dark Magic, to be sure!). On Thief, there've been a couple that stand out, both relatively recent. First, there was that moment when all of the game elements came together for the first time and you could really see what the game was going

to be. Not that the game was any fun at that point - it wasn't... no game is at that point - but you could play it and see where it fell short and start tuning it up until it was the game everyone envisioned.

The second magic development moment came just in the last couple of weeks, really, when you could play the game and see the fruits of all that tuning effort. I've been playing the game a lot recently and, finally, it feels like a Thief game. It has all the hold-your-breath moments a Thief game ought to have. And when someone walks up behind me as I play, I jump out of my skin. That's good gameplay!

If you could be Garrett the master thief for one day, how would you use your skills? Is there any way to answer this question without getting into trouble with my wife? Let me think for a second...

Okay, how about this: I'd like to sneak into several competitors' offices and play their games before anyone else. Let's see... Maybe start with Half Life 2... move on to Ico 2... then Psychonauts (that Tim Schafer's a wacky guy and I love his stuff!)... then I'd hide in the shadows wherever Shigeru Miyamoto or Will Wright are working on whatever they're working on – just to be a fly on the wall and listen in on whatever design discussions those guys are having would be awesome...







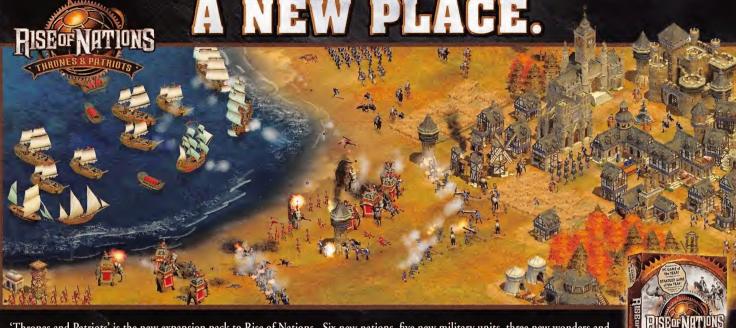
THE HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMES!

Send your entries to: High Score!Comp, PC PowerPlay, 78 Renwick St, Redfern, 2016

Well, okay, it's probably stretching the truth a little to say you can win the entire history of videogames. But you could win a book about it. Thanks to McGraw Hill Australia, we have two copies of the just published second edition of High Score! The Illustrated History of Electronic Games. The cover image gives you a good indication of how comprehensive it is – there's Mario, Pacman and, er... some chick from Everquest. It's a good read, if a little shallow and inaccurate at times, but it does look good on the shelf or coffee table. And it's chock full of happy gaming memories, which is what it's all about really. For a chance to win, answer this question to the best of your ability on the back of an envelope:

Q. What do Mario, Pacman and the chick from Everquest have in common?

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HISTORY

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COMPLITER































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STARGATE GAMES GO DOWN UNDER

To the Tune of \$11.5m

A ussie game developer Perception best known for Thunderboats and Top Down Racer - has announced that it has landed a multimillion dollar contract that could be the biggest games deal to head down under.

This baby is worth a whopping \$11.5m and gives Perception the rights to make games based on the popular Stargate SG-1 television series as well as any possible spin-offs including Stargate: Atlantis.

Perception might not be a household name but besides putting out its own games it has gained cred through its work with EA Australia and Intel. Beyond that, if you are wondering how a small Oz gameco landed such a big fish, the answer is simple: Perception asked.

Managing Director Ben Lenzo made

the first move by approaching MGM with his game proposals and he obviously knocked them dead. As a separate deal, Perception also managed to secure a publishing alliance with JoWood, putting it in a great position to take on such a large project.

The press release quotes MGM Interactive's Vice President of Production and Business Development, Neil Haldar, as saying: "The high level of passion and creative energy they bring to game production is well matched by JoWooD's keen appreciation for the strength of the 'Stargate SG-1' universe and its viewership."

Since Perception hasn't generated the buzz of some Australian developers like Auran, Ratbag or Krome, a deal like this just goes to show the power of the right idea at the right time.

The Stargate game will be available in 2005 on PC, PS2 and Xbox.

Timothy C. Best



MICROSOFT TO MANAGE YOUR RIGHTS

Redefines "legitimate content" to mean "restricted content"

M icrosoft has unveiled a new model for digital rights management designed to allow users to download content and then copy it to portable devices.

Currently, copyright owners are concerned that people are copying songs bought over the Internet onto multiple devices. Microsoft's new DRM technology – previously known as Janus – will lock down a file once its license has expired.

In other words, the new technology is designed to replace the "buy a CD and play it as much as you like" model that currently exists – instead you will only 'own' the content for a certain period of time before you have to pay a renewal fee.

Microsoft and content providers insist the new model will be beneficial to users, and all parties frequently go on about "legitimate content". The Register columnist John Lettice points out that in this case "legitimate" can be said to mean "restricted" since users will only be able to access the files they've purchased while their time-restricted license for the content is active.

Content providers are excited because, as Roxio CEO Chris Gorog puts it, "the new technology should catalyse the recurring revenue model for record labels and artists." Which means if you want to listen to a song, you have to keep paying for it once a month for the rest of your life.

PCPP's advice is to start stockpiling CDs now, and prepare for a future in which you simply won't be able to buy any song with the confidence that you'll still be able to listen to it ten years later – what's more, you can expect to have to pay the full price for the song again once the next version of the DRM technology is received.

Still, it's all good news for struggling artists like Metallica. After all, the current lack of a recurring revenue model is robbing them of their rightful millions.

Anthony Fordham













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GAMES GO COMMERCIAL

Timothy C. Best investigates plans to watch what we play...

FI FCTRONIC PEOPLE READERS Nielson has for recently been testing "electronic people metres" which automatically read what people are watching rather than relying on people filling out their ratings book, usually at the end of the week. Controversy has flared around the system because the electronic results show a marked decrease in people watching shows featuring minorities - much more so than any swings in the regular system. This had lead minority action groups and even some US lawmakers to auestion the reliability of the new tests ... rather than the political correctness of the people filling out forms in hindsight. With TV advertising coming to around \$60US billion the stakes are huge and it could mean that minorities might start having a lot harder time getting their stories told.

Well it looks like we've moved from closet hobby to being a recognised part of the media. AC Nielson has announced that it is teaming up with industry heavy-weight Activision to rate games like it does TV shows and, more recently, movies.

With the help of Activision, the company is developing a new service which is designed to rate the on-going exposure to advertising generated by games. In other words, it is trying to tell advertisers what people are playing, what those people like to buy and just how much advertising they are taking in. As you can imagine this paves the way for a more accountable, mature and widespread use of advertising in games.

Apparently Nielson has been monitoring general game playing for years now as a part of its "Total Viewing Sources", which comes from a small section on its regular ratings documents about how TVs are used, beyond just what channel they are on.

This showed that that figures had crept up until around 8 percent of men aged 18 to 34, and 15 percent of teenagers, have their TVs set to "gaming" during prime time. It's no surprise that more mainstream companies are starting to take gaming seriously.

To get the ball rolling Nielson conducted a phone survey of about 1000 18-34 year-olds based on the demographic information and statistical spread from their TV rating system. It found that 27% of active male gamers between 18-34 noticed advertising in the last game they played and that it was the people who played more, plus slightly older gamers, who noticed it most.

Beyond that it found that 52 percent of people in age range liked games to contain real products and with 70 percent of them saying that these realworld items made the games feel more realistic (I'm going to go out on a limb and say a lot of people playing racing games got the call). How appealing must that sound to advertisers?

Once the rating system is in place, expect some big things from our industry being swept further into the mainstream. Firstly, it will give the suits benchmarks to compare dollars spent on game advertising to dollars put into more mainstream media like print or TV, and it'll become pretty clear just



Once advertisers start making investment decisions based on Nielsen's numbers, we may see a similar publisher obsession with ratings that we've seen with TV

how many people with buying power are actually players.

That should mean more money for game development. Advertising pays. Unfortunately, you can be pretty sure that advertisers are only going to risk sinking cash into well-established brands or game companies, meaning that mainly it'll be big budgets that get bigger.

Also, since publishers will have a much better idea of what's working, who it's working for and how to target games for neglected demographics hopefully we'll see more games get sold each year, which will result in a growing industry.

That's all the good stuff, but the application of TV-style ratings also has to strike at least a little fear into the hearts of gamers. We've all for increasing the knowledge involved in game design, but certain marketing guidelines can have quite insidious side-effects. Once advertisers start making investment decisions based on Nielson's numbers,

we may see a similar publisher obsession with ratings that we've seen with TV

We've seen really interesting – not to mention cult – TV shows like American Gothic, Dark Skies, Brimstone, Now and Again, Babylon 5 and now even Angel, all fade from production because they haven't hit magical rating numbers. In the case of the very average Birds of Prey, it was canned not because too few people watched it, but because the wrong people, with the wrong spending patterns, watched it.

Will the pursuit of safe money lead to even less innovation and risks, or will more money floating around allow more pet-projects to get off the ground?

If all the copy-cat home renovation TV shows are anything to go by, be afraid. Be very afraid. Of course, the lure of cash isn't going to reach everyone and I think soon we'll all be thanking our lucky start for independent developers and veteran game designers striking out to make the games that they've always wanted.

BEYOND THE With Anthony Fordham DIGITAL CURTAIN

I thought the best way to draw this inaugural instalment of the Curtain would be to hit up Google and simply type in "weird game concept" and see what appeared. Sure enough, the vagaries of the PageRank system threw back the work of the Pinnacle Entertainment Group, producers of the fine pen-and-paper RPGs Weird War 2 and the Weird West. Simply take WW2 and the Wild West and make them weird. Weird, in this case, means adding werewolves, vampires, zombies and magic. Sounds cool? Then you'll be pleased to know that Pinnacle has recently engaged the services of a couple of developers to produce PC game versions.

Weird Wars is set in the 1940s, where repeated shelling and blasting of Europe has somehow allowed horrible nightmarish creatures to escape into the world and make the war even more horrific than it really was in real life. Developer Techland doesn't actually have a website, for some reason, but Pinnacle promises the game will be a top-down sprite-based RPG in the vein of Arcanum. Expect

Digital Curtain n. The border that separates the usual, predictable game concepts - be they re-hash sequel or bold new direction - from the whacky, outlandish, barely workable ideas thrown up by a brave few. (Orig. from Iron Curtain, since many of these crazy games seem to come from Eastern Europe)

Commandos-style missions interlaced with plenty of spellcasting and zombie smooshing. Nice! Deadlands, meanwhile, is set in the Weird West, where wronged native Americans have released a bunch of ancient spirits (who may be under the control of the Old Ones of Cthulhu fame, or maybe just a different bunch of Old Ones - developer Headfirst is also hard at work on Call of Cthulhu) who in turn have released zombies, werewolves, vampires and etc. A massive earthquake in California has revealed the precious resource Ghost Rock, which burns ten times longer and hotter than coal, and suddenly in 1863 there's an industrial revolution! (Previous work by industrial revolutionaries notwithstanding). This one promises to be a 3D RPG, Deus Ex style, although that may be giving the developers too much credit. Remember, if you can't wait for these games to make an appearance, hit up the Pinnacle website (www.peginc.com) and grab yourself the pen and paper versions of the Weird West and Weird War 2. It's fabulous.









STREETS OF LAT

New PC multiplayer modes have transformed the City of Angels into your personal battleground. Fire on each other as you race through 240-square miles of re-created LA. Go toe-to-toe with a massive array of martial arts moves. Draw rocket launchers and crossbows from an arsenal of new weapons.

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ESCAPE FROM TRIVIALITY

Independent games team attempts to bring meaning to games. Anthony Fordham runs the gauntlet of border protection...

THE RESPONSE Major developers like id Software must be grinding their teeth about the amount of high profile attention EFW has received. From the New York Times to The Times the game has popped up in the world's great media institutions. Usually, attached to a quote from Ruddock. We asked Kipper if this kind of coverage was at all disappointing. "No, actually, I was surprised at the amount of mainstream interest, but Ruddock's response iust raised the profile of the project, made himself look undemocratic (trying to deny us free speech) and ignorant (games inciting people to break laws? GTA3 anvone?). One of the most heartening reactions was when I was talking to a detainee on the phone at Port Headland just as the media frenzy started, and he said that when they all found out about EFW it kind of made their day."

bout a year ago, gaming got itself in A the Big Media (again) when an outraged politician howled how an upcoming game was sure to corrupt the nation and send us into a spiral of anarchy, fast driving and easy sex.

However, the game in the spotlight was something a little different. Escape From Woomera takes a contrary position to most games - rather than escapist entertainment designed to allow us to switch off the real world for a few hours, the game attempts to switch us on. Putting the player in the position of an inmate at Australia's most famous detention centre, the player's task is to, well, escape.

Attorney General Phillip Ruddock (who was previously the Immigration Minister) was horrified that such a game was not only being developed, but had in fact been given a \$25,000 grant by the Australia Council.

"The decision reflects poorly upon the Australia Council and its judgement, that the organisation should lend its name to the promotion of unlawful behaviour," said Ruddock in a 2003 interview with The Age.

He called on the Australia Council to review the grant, and little further was heard about the game in the mainstream press. Escape from Woomera Creative Director - who, for various reasons may only be identified as Kipper - says the call for the review was little more than a publicity stunt.

"We got wind of it alright, but the review went off okay, in part because I don't think the funding decision was taken lightly by the Australian Council in the first place - I spent two years researching, lobbying and constructing an argument about how games were an artform that deserved public funding," he says.

Kipper describes the thinking behind Ruddock's call for a review as "like the way Latham and a few others went around saying they'd ban Tia Maria flavoured Tim Tams."

All this fuss is because Escape from Woomera isn't like an ordinary game. It's part entertainment, part political activism, and the team says the whole point of the project is to get gamers





thinking about the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. But it's not a smooth process - many members of the team have to work under pseudonyms or risk jeopardising their day jobs.

"Software employment contracts are pretty harsh - meaning our employers literally own our brains 24 hours a day," says Kipper. He also says this doesn't stop most people in the industry having outside hobbies, and his just happens to be political activism instead of knitting.

We often feel demoralised and unenthusiastic about the state of game development, and the arcade-based, shoot-'em-up, puppet-show, Saturdaymorning-cartoon aesthetic criteria," says Kipper, quoting from the Scratchware Manifesto (www.theunderdogs.org/scratch.php).

That said, Kipper makes it clear the team is not interested in making The Sims: Mandatory Detention Expansion Pack. The game is built on Half-Life technology (although it will move to a more modern 3D engine after initial release) so the game will be most familiar to FPS fans.

But gamers shouldn't anticipate being able to mow down ACS guards with a





Return to Castle Wolfenstein style lightning gun. "Players will be limited to what is available to detainees in real life, and what they have been known to use. So no guns," says Kipper.

"That said, ethical decisions and motivations are left as far as possible up to the player."

The game is "political dynamite" as the saying goes, but it's also an extremely ambitious project. The more development progresses, the more EFW seems to look less like a Half-Life TC and more like Deus Ex: The Detainee's War. Kipper hints at the player using video cameras, mobile phones and having to rely on communities of NPCs within the detention centre to facilitate their escape.

'We're not aiming for the mainstream gaming audience. We're aiming for that 1% of gamers we think might be like us - sick of playing games made for K-Mart, sick of games that force reactionary ideology down their throats and sick of the growing conservatism of the games industry," says Kipper.

So the question remains: are you with us, or against us?

THE BEST GAME YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED

ORM: ISLANDS AT

Netstorm is an RTS like no other. Set on an archipelago floating high in the clouds, the player must first bridge the gap to his enemy, working with sections shaped like Tetris blocks. Once a path is completed, rather than churning out troops, Netstorm focuses almost solely on the construction of automated turrets, with no combat capable units directly controlled by the player. In leaving the behaviour of units up to simple Al routines, the game becomes truly strategic, almost like a game of chess played

at realtime pace. Unique, addictive and extremely difficult, Netstorm is well worth checking out for those who like a little more "S" in their RTS.

Stephen Schulze

Do you have a favourite obscure game? Send your 100 word submissions to letters@pcpowerplay.com.au with the game title in the subject line.

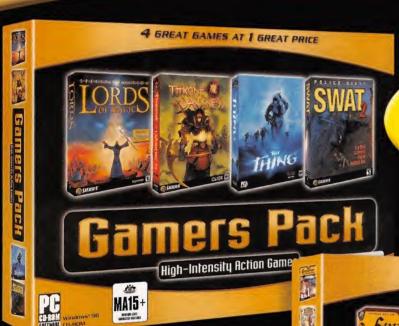








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All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham

PIONEER PRO DJ DVJ-X1

Price: \$3900 Distributor: Pioneer Contact: www.pioneerprodj.com

iki-wiki-word or whatever the hell it is cool DJ types say to each other these days. Honestly, youth culture metastasizes so rapidly and so randomly these days I'm buggered if I can keep up. But word up brothers, if you're still scratching vinyl then you are living in last century's digital slum (and using analogue equipment so double shame on you!) nowadays it's all about scratching DVDs. That's right, complement your next awesome sunrise set Tidy-from-Secret-Lifeof-Us-style with a likewise awesome video show where you mix and remix the dodgy three-way sex scene between Neve Campbell, Denise Richards and that guy with the teeth in Wild Things, IN REAL TIME! If that last sentence made sense to you then you are truly ready for the Pro DJ DVJ-X1. This thing has to be cool - look how many buttons there are all over it.





ALCOMATE PRO

Price: \$160 Distributor: Yahoo Contact: store.yahoo.com

hen my local installed a big clanking automatic breath testing machine (your blood alcohol level for only \$2!) it had kind of a reverse effect to what the proprietors presumably planned: rather than encouraging responsible drinking, people got into blood alcohol level competitions with each other. Many deaths. Anyway, nowadays you don't even have to pay to get an unreliable blood alcohol level reading, beyond the initial layout for a nifty device like this one. There are a few readers on the market at the moment but we chose to highlight this one because it looks most like some kind of medical instrument from one of the dodgier Star Trek: TNG spinoffs. Perhaps it's something Seven of Nine might use to put makeup on, because you know, the Borg are very big on makeup.

Anyway, breathe into the tube on this thing and pass it around your friends. Whoever has the lowest reading has to buy the next round. Note that if your reading is 2.5 or higher, you are technically dead.



Price: \$50 Distributor: Liksang Contact: www.lik-sang.com

S o you thought the GBA was a dead-end toy console with no appeal to the hardcore gadget-mad Dick-Smith-Funway-Into-Electronics fanboy huh? Think again. With this nifty device you can play compressed audio and most importantly video on the GBA in glorious 256 colour! A gimmick, some of you might say. Sure. But for \$50 plus the cost of a compact flash card and reader that you've probably already got laying around the place, you might as well have a go with it.

Imagine, sitting on a bus next to a guy with a 1995-era handheld TV and saying "Hah! My little player has a picture almost as good as yours! And it only cost twice as much!"

DELUXE MINI-FRIDGE

Price: \$140 Distributor: Think Geek Contact: www.thinkgeek.com

et's not muck around: every serious gamer needs a little fridge by their elbow to keep precious fluids in. Caffeine must be available at all times, either chilly and fizzy, or in powdered form ready to be added to boiling water. But did you know fridges can be used to store all kinds of other useful things: bacteria cultures, smallpox vaccine, the severed fingers of your one-time playground tormentors, and very small polar bears. This fridge is indeed quite deluxe, with funky 50sdiner-slash-medical-incubator styling, its 20 litre capacity is described by the manufacturer as "ultra" What's more, it has an LCD right there on the top,

which displays the temperature. The other crazy thing about this fridge, besides the window on the front, is the way it can also be used as a 'warmer.' That's right!

Chill down to 44 Fahrenheit or warm up to 140 Fahrenheit! (Note: Celsius temperatures may vary.) The distributor claims this fridge can only be shipped within the continental US, but I'm sure a clever citizen of the interweb like yourself can figure out a way around that.

WURLITZER DIGITAL JUKEBOX

Price: TBA Distributor: Gibson Contact: www.gibsonaudio.com

t just wouldn't be Hotware unless we gave you the opportunity to spend big bucks on a home digital music device that you don't really need. How big are the bucks in this case? We don't know yet, but you can rest assured that they will be prestige-inflatingly big. Take a fairly modest 80GB hard drive and perch it atop a great, retro-styled mountain of gleaming aluminium and exclusive Klipsch speakers, give it a detachable colour LCD remote control, and slap the Wurlitzer name on it for that extra edge of cool and you have yourself the Wurlitzer Digital Jukebox. The remote control uses 802.11b so you can wander around the house cackling like a madman and randomly playing snatches of Roxette and Michael Jackson number ones at top volume to freak out the neighbours and/or your dog. The remote can also take an SD card so you can even go down the street with it. There are a couple of versions of the jukebox; since most of the tower is just empty space you can get a small tabletop version of it or a really boring component version which is utterly pointless because it doesn't have that classic Wurlitzer arched top. Still, it's vour money.



ROBOSAPIEN

Price: \$180 Distributor: Dorcy Irwin Pacific Contact: www.wowwee.com



e love little robots. Nothing represents humanity's domination of that brazen whore Mother Nature better than a little robot running around the house picking up after you. Robosapien is an important first step on that golden path to true technological dominance. I mean, look at him - he's like a cute little ice hockey goalie! Not only does he have 67 pre-programmed functions including picking-up, throwing (knives? Here's hoping), high-five-ing and three different karate moves, his remote control is ergonomic!

Yes, you read that last sentence right: he does karate. He's also a prize winner: awarded the "much coveted" Boy's Toy of the Year at the Australian Toy, Hobby and Nursery Fair. And for far less than the price of a crappy Microsoft-powered MP3 player, he's damn good value. How can you resist him? He's so cute and goalie-like!



PIONEER AVIC-N1

Price: \$2500 Distributor: Pioneer Contact: www.pioneer.com

f you go all out and buy a digital radio f you go all out and bu, a sugar tuner, DVD player, six-disc CD changer and GPS voice navigation system, the inside of your car might end up looking more like the flight deck of one of those weird Russian cargo jets that suddenly explode on landing for no reason. Alternatively, you could buy this thing. It's an all-in-one device that defies categorising, since it includes something from pretty much every kind of device you can stick in a car. It's a GPS navigator, with a database of 12 million (yankee) locations, so just casually mention to it that you want to spend the night dancing the funky salsa in a leather club in Lobster Race, Maine, and it will give you directions in passable English.

Then, there's the "built-in Supertuner IIID built-in tuner" - that's twice as built-in as other tuners. Once you've tuned your digital radio and determined no bastard is transmitting anything worth listening to yet, flip a switch and enjoy DVD playback on the same screen as the navigator. (Warning: can get confusing.) Finally, if you're the kind of person who takes your car to "the lab" instead of Lubemobile, the AVIC can display all those crazy, Need-for-Speed-esque vehicle dynamics that you people celebrate by strapping neon lights under your chassis. You crazy guys.

Your equipment holding you back?



www.customcases.com.au



OUT TO PLAY Timothy C. Best

Inside the Top 100

ach year we do a Top 100 story and each year we get all sorts of interesting feedback ...very little of which is game related.
Strangely most of it focuses on what drugs we're using and how we managed to sneak such a large supply into an office building.

I figured in this column I'd take you behind the scenes on the Top 100, since this time around the sacred duty of writing up the PCPP list of lists fell to me.

Take this column as you will: as an explanation, as an apology, maybe an admission of guilt or perhaps even as an insight into the inner workings of the mysterious coterie that is PCPP.

The first big mystery is why the Queer theme instantly came my way, and, unfortunately, I can't answer that one. I guess I just couldn't compete with the manly presences of Wildgoose, Fordham and Ring.

I swear I had something in my eye at that movie, my clothes only match out of sheer luck and the only reason I can dance is genetics. I'm not gay; I'm just not a complete no-rhythm white boy. I'm a half no-rhythm white boy.

Anyhoo, you'd think that making up a Top 100 list would be easy. You'd sit your crack team of game buffs around a table, get some beer and pizza and then get to work letting David arrange things how he likes. Being the editor, he has the power to do that, dissenters end up in the Hell of Mediocre Games ... they're the ones not bad enough to be fun reviewing, but not good enough to be fun playing.

Actually if David were a list Nazi it would make things a lot easier, but as it stands we actually have to put together a list the whole team can live with. The first thing that happens is we round up the usual suspects from our past Top 100, and then grab the hot new talent that has sent our Gold stamp flying. The final touches of magic come from the wildcard entries. These come from the depths of the PCPP staff, often submitted in the dead of night. Here you'll see the case stated for the likes of Vangers, UFO Enemy Unknown or Doris Day's Show Tunes Deluxe.

From these sources the master list coalesces. Then we stare. Blankly. We scratch our heads a little; we flick thumb tacks into the styro roofing and balance pencils on our noses.

The night everyone was assembled to hammer out the Top 100, this e-mail from David resulted: "In the end we realised we were struggling too much with what the Top 100 was to even begin thinking about what games should be there and in what order."

I remember having an argument with someone that the top movie at the time wasn't Titanic just because more people enjoyed it and paid to go see it than ay other. Even though I might have lost that one, that reasoning would have put The Sims at number one, and that didn't really seem right somehow. What about intensity, immersion and importance to the art?

With that in mind the PCPP crew were joined with a common purpose and eventually, in David's words, there was "something resembling consensus: Doom should be number one."

Point by point it made sense until David pointed out that that would mean that Doom was the pinnacle of gaming thus far ... which lead to a much faster consensus: we needed a new number one game.

If you were there to cast your gaze around the assembled group you would have seen something in every set of eyes, a small spark of desire. No matter how hard we pushed it aside, it would not relent. That desire was to do something crazy and just rate the games just on fun. We know for damn

making the game a stinker, but when a game manages to stink when every individual element is great ... that's the defining challenge of a game reviewer.

Sure, you can just say, "I don't understand it but this game has drunk deep of great suckage," but that doesn't help the reader much.

What a good game reviewer does is look at the deeper currents that have swept this binary myth off course and game safely combines all the great stuff that other games have risked breaking in ... kudos to you Mr. Bigshot, you've just spent \$4m making the FPS equivalent of the Spice Girls, great."

I figure you clap hardest for the people who put their balls on the line to make the proto-type rather than the guys who get the waxing right.

So when you read the top 100 and see that Deus Ex 2 is higher than Far Cry and you still want to write in an complain about it, console yourself with the fact that we're just losers trying really hard to impress chicks in our philosophy classes ... and remember to call us on it while the rest of your email is coming together.

With all this in mind, I'm sure that it's a surprise that our #1 game is a fairly linear, pure FPS with a setting that has been done to death.

I could tell you that games are an interactive medium and that this game sucked us in and made us shelve our highfalutin ideas for a day or two. Or I could tell you that this WWII epic did a lot of things right that should stand as a lesson to anyone trying to make an FPS. Maybe I should just tell you that it slept its way to thee top, but I figure I'll just tell you want really went down.

We did what we do every year when we need a final word on our number one game: we use voodoo. You just can't argue with a dead chicken.



You'll see the case stated for the likes of Vangers or Doris Day's Show Tunes Deluxe

sure that such rashness would cut down on the claims pooling each of our brain cells we wouldn't know a decent game if it came up to us in a Hawaiian shirt and sat on us ... but there's a good reason why we can't just make everyone happy like that: we're overeducated tossers. Just ask us about cultural theory or the vaguest notions of game design theory and how it relates to the formation of the American national identity. I'd dare you, but I'm not that cruel.

It's not just co-incidence that this is the dark secret we all share. Let me explain. It's easy to review a game when something is horribly broken onto the rocks of Crapatoa. We don't actually use all of the stuff about ideological conflicts, Jungian collective consciousness or the psychology of violence in the reviews because we don't want to get beat up if you see us in the street, but it's understanding how these cultural products work that let us come up with metaphors about monkeys, sky diving and comparisons to our last girlfriend. On some cultural level these things tie together ... and we just express it in bizarre ways because Seanbaby did stuff like that and he was cool.

All of this means that comments like this spring readily to mind: "Wow, your

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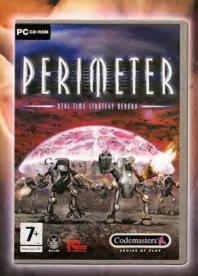


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TECH TALK Stuart Calvin

Telstra Tantrum



charisma of a wood chip and the brains of a rocking horse, also has no excuse for failure because they have a bevy of Australian public service (APS) bureaucrats organised into groups (in the larger government departments), divisions, branches and directorates, Senior Executive Service branch-head officers are often on \$140K per annum so go figure how much the division and group heads are paid with our taxes. In the bestpaying Australian Government departments, the Executive Level 2 officer, or Director, (a branch head will own at least three if not four or five directorates) will creep over \$100K by January 2006 under the latest round of Enterprise Bargaining Arrangements. On top of the bureaucracy, are the Parliamentary staff and advisors. Most of these 'good-people, doing good work' are also clever, very clever (they become politicians or SES officers in later life). If these people, from Director up, are not value-adding, I want to know how they shave or apply makeup in the morning.

OK, what is the point of all this shite? If you don't realise that there's actually a fair bit of intellectual horse power available to our Australian senior leadership group, in addition to the inspired personal traits that our leaders are chosen for, you don't deserve to vote or have broadband – nah, just kidding. I have several problems with Telstra – a few biggys

and some minor irritating posers which have pissed me off a bit leadership failures at all levels. Firstly, back to my leadership gripe and bureaucratic bitch. With all the brain cells in Telstra and the fantastic range of products it can deliver, why the hell is it not a \$10 share?! It's the early 21st century isn't it? We can fly around the world in a day or so and perform heart/lung transplants, why can't the Telstra leadership build value for shareholders and all Australians more widely? As a proud Australian and shareholder I was betting on twenty-bucks-a-share come 2010; not because I do own shares and want to make a profit but because I knew it could deliver with the right leadership, culture and performance framework. For a start, it has a monopoly on the exchange system for chrissakes! Derrr! It's not like WebOne or NetSpeed can connect me to broadband if I want and they can't because Telstra's not willing or not able to when needed; they can practise restricted trading within a monopoly. Of course, there's no way Telstra could cope if every bill-paying Australian breezed on over to broadband: the information, technology and communication gene pool just isn't big enough, yet. They must have a strategy to restrict the



was manipulated by the rest of Cabinet, the Security Cabinet, the PM or the Minister for Defence or the cleaner, because the claims were never going to succeed. Any way it turned out, the senior political leadership was iron-plated and if there was a basis to the accusation, it was just another brick in the pro-American wall that was needed at the time. With any luck, by the time you read this, the new Telstra chairperson

where others failed, in buying a publisher if only to get free newspapers as well as free calls and line rental. I agree with the Labor Party on this one: it would highly politicize Telstra at a time when we need god-damn solid, transformational leadership at the very top. Business strategy comes from the top, not the middle, not the bottom.

Around the same time, the line Telstra rental increase was rumoured, but was neither confirmed nor denied by Telstra , well, you know what happened. I wonder how many land lines have been disconnected since? I know a few people who have and are just keeping their mobile. Thirty five bucks a month gets you \$30 worth of calls these days and 50 free SMS. Is this another strategy by Telstra? Do they have a long term vision of wireless communication? Hell of a way to do it...what? Is Alston in charge already?!

Over a period of six years and four months, I have been called variously, Stewert Calvin and Stewart Calvin on my Telstra bills. I have phoned in complaints, visited Telstra shops, filled in more forms than a war-time quartermaster and emailed "contact us" 'til blue in the face. Anyway, thankyou Telstra for finally making the change – I'm most thankful. It was addressed to "Dear Stewert". Thanks again Testral.

A politician, despite having the charisma of a wood chip and the brains of a rocking horse, also has no excuse for failure

potential for unrestrained growth for physical and economic reasons and if they do, it ain't working because there's too many unhappy campers living within 5Km of an exchange.

Astute media watchers will know that Max Uechtritz, the ABC's Head of News, has quit the public broadcaster for a commercial network. His loss to public broadcasting is considerable indeed but he is most well known for an attack by our best mate Emeritus Senator Alston. Alston singled him out for prejudicial behaviour concerning his reporting on the Iraq war. Alston claimed it was biased and anti-American, and then ordered an investigation! I suspect Alston himself

will have been named. In mid-April, some wag in a prominent print media publication suggested that Alston would have the credentials for the top job if he put his hand up. That wag was actually John Howard. I'm really worried about the boys at the top now. There's obviously no performance appraisal in the political system apart from being able to keep your seat or be able to step down when asked by Cabinet. I've marked Alston down as a "not want" on my 360 feedback form for the Communications portfolio and I sure as shit don't want him running our multi-billion dollar, peak communications enterprise. If he did 'win' it, he'd probably succeed,



THE GUERILLA GAMER



Curse of the Jade Monkey

ast month I was cruising the PCPP forums because, after all, I'm a masochist at heart, and I found a thread dedicated to myself and the work I do here.

If I were a more dedicated researcher and if any of my crackpot ideas stayed swirling in my skull for more than eight minutes, I would have written down the name of the plucky lad who, after vaguely complimenting me then said "but is there anything in his life he isn't jaded about?" but I'm not, they don't and I didn't.

Is there anything in my life I'm not jaded about? That's quite a question. I'll spare you the long and boring details of my life beyond gaming, but you can take it as read that I'm jaded about pretty much 100% of that, except my pet housebrick, he's pretty cool.

But surely it's my attitudes to gaming you people are really interested in. Have I reached a stage where I've become completely, utterly and of course totally jaded about gaming? Come to think of it, I'm not even sure what jaded is supposed to mean...

...oh, well according to dictionary.com jaded means either tired and worn out, dulled by surfeit or cynically and pretentiously callous. I think pretty much all of those apply to both me and gaming.

I mean, here's an industry in which the people who control the purse strings and decide the fates of dozens of bloated artistic teams around the world don't even understand the products they are supposed to be helping sell.

I cite a representative of a major publisher who once angrily insisted to me that their Microsoft Flight Simulator 2000 add-on wasn't an add-on at all and in fact would run as a standalone product and was certainly much better than Microsoft Flight Simulator 2000 and it was insulting of me to suggest that their product was in some way affiliated with Microsoft - all this despite the fact the add-on in question most definitely needed Microsoft Flight Simulator 2000 to even run. This was no clueless PR hack mind you, this was



The people who control the purse strings don't even understand the products they sell

the goddamn head of sales.

And speaking of PR, here's an industry where PR companies will spend millions on glossy pamphlets and press release packs, which they send unbidden to everyone even vaguely interested in their games, but as soon as someone dares ring one of the phone numbers listed on those press releases for more details. screenshots or heaven forfend an interview with the developer, the PR company refuses to give any more details, screenshots or access to the developers. Why is it so? Perhaps they just like toying with us. Perhaps, even as they build their glossy press packs, perhaps they're laughing. Laughing at us.

Sure, there are exceptions. Westwood, for instance, used to be really approachable, ready to give a good quote and would actually provide interested enquirers with plenty of info which at the same time didn't contravene any of their non-disclosure agreements. Perhaps that's why EA shut them down.

But what about the games themselves? Can you blame me for being jaded? Personally I own a hefty PC, an Xbox, a GameCube and a GBA. Every time I go into town I rush eagerly into EB Games to look at all the shiny new titles for those four platforms. And week after week, I see the same tired cases, slumped despondently on the shelves waiting for someone to come in out of the cold and love them.

Sometimes, just sometimes, I see a row of new games. So I run up, scattering schoolchildren to my left and right, knocking over the abandoned N-Gage display in my haste, only to discover all the new games are just empty boxes with "coming soon" written on them.

You'd think that with four freaking platforms at home I should be able to buy a new game at least once a week. I walk in there with fistfuls of disposable income, begging to be sold something, but there's simply never anything new on the shelves. GBA seems to have

degenerated into a digital platform for collector cards, all GameCube has is a new and heavily bastardised iteration of Final Fantasy, Xbox has last month's PS2 games, and owing to some piece of legislation I missed out on hearing about, it now appears to be illegal to sell any game for PC that isn't a WW2 shooter or CSI.

So to the guy who wondered if I was jaded about absolutely everything in my life, I ask again - can you blame me?

I can distinctly remember ten years ago rushing into a game store (which, by the way, wasn't part of a megalithic nationwide chain, Maccasstyle) and trying not to let my brain completely flip out as it beheld the sheer amount of stuff on the shelves. How ironic that back in 1994 I was still in High School and could rarely afford to buy more than one game every ten weeks.

Perhaps then, this is the issue. Perhaps my jaded nature comes mostly from that second definition of the word: dulled by surfeit. In a world where I could casually go down the shops RIGHT NOW and buy a game (on the assumption I can default on my mobile phone bill another two weeks) nothing seems worth buying.

Could it be that being an ex-game reviewer who still gets free games sent to him by PR companies who are too incompetent to even update their mailing lists, makes me somehow less qualified to give commentary on games?

Hell no. This industry needs a jaded voice. Who else is going to stand up and fling rotten fruit when Developer X describes their new WW2 shooter as the ultimate gameplay experience? Someone's gotta do it. And I've got a market garden.

The Guerrilla Gamer is a veteran PC games journalist who also dabbles in consoles from time to time. Some readers have questioned why PCPP feels the need to publish this disclaimer at the end of each of his articles. Get ready for the shock news: he writes these disclaimers himself. Now that is seriously JADED.

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AND ALL GOOD 🗫 STORES

DEVELOPER DIARY

S.T.A.L.K.E.R Shadow of Chernobyl

Developer Diary #4

Picture the scene: "In the dead centre of Prypjat stand a series of tumbledown buildings. Half broken walls spill onto once busy roadways and a mess of cracks suck at the waste. Rabid dogs prowl the early morning haze and a single S.T.A.L.K.E.R hugs a makeshift buttress, waiting for the chance to take a shot. A sudden shift in weight from the S.T.A.L.K.E.R causes a barely audible rustle of material and the stalemate is broken. The dogs have been alerted and the fight begins..

At its core, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is a game of survival and what could be more integral to this than combat? The way in which combat takes place, the rules that govern encounters and the laws that define the scope of every confrontation must be fully supportive of S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s ultimate Life Simulation aim.

Every sentient entity operating within the exclusion zone has the potential for hostility, gaining combat experience with each encounter. Yet unlike many games, confrontation can take place without the involvement of the central character - a feature that makes for a living, developing world.

"No-one is perfect" is the statement that best sums up our approach to creating believable opponents in S.T.A.L.K.E.R. One of our key ideas was to imagine monsters and humans as flawed creations. Giving them perfect hearing and vision would make for limited and predictable gameplay. The more interesting approach was in limiting them, in creating characters whose approach to battle would be as individual as that of the player's. Some characters will have difficulty seeing in the dark; seeing

problems of course and then there are reaction times to be considered - especially the reactions associated with subtle sounds such as the cracking of a twig. Any character hearing a sound such as this, or spying a movement in the undergrowth, will approach the source in a cautious manner. They will be aware of the way the landscape and the lighting will affect their approach and so make for deadly opponents. Equally, they won't be stupid and are as likely to retreat from potentially hazardous situations

It is this ability to adapt that makes the combat system within S.T.A.L.K.E.R. so wonderfully rich. There are no set patterns, no fixed wavs in which any given character will respond. Situation, ability and opportunity - all of these things shape the way confrontation unfolds. An opponent can outskirt the enemy from behind, lay ambushes and even run from hopeless situations. In other words, computer controlled characters will behave exactly like their human counterparts. It's an exciting world to play in as strength and perceived strength, advantage and perceived advantage play a vital role. Even the potentially cowardly characters might press forward an attack if they sense a weakness in you. Interestingly, characters are also well able to maintain their distance from an attacker so as to lessen potential fire damage. The whole system quickly teaches the player valuable lessons in estimating the opposition as computercontrolled characters constantly evaluate physical prowess along with levels of morale during an encounter.

Not content with establishing a

behavioural modifiers. S.T.A.L.K.E.R. also contains a wide variety of opponents. The most dangerous of these will, of course, be the hostile S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Meeting one of these people becomes a clash of intellect and ability, as they prove more than able to use the weapons you have probably been using on lesser creatures. Other S.T.A.L.K.E.R's will be programmed with human-like attributes just like you. They will possess courage, generosity, cowardice, hate, love and so on. They can be friendly, neutral or aggressive and will seek to exploit their own position in every situation. Whereas with mutated animals you have to consider their natural (or unnatural) levels of cunning, with other S.T.A.L.K.E.R's you will quickly learn that the power of the AI means you should start considering them as people in their own right.

Co-ordinated by interests and outlooks, S.T.A.L.K.E.R's unite into groupings within the zone. Several different clans exist, each with their own ideology and goals. Depending on how a player performs or what actions they undertake, these clans may extend membership. By joining,

a member will be expected to work towards the clan's goals and participate in conflicts as required. There are

subtle customs best learned if one is to survive for long within this world especially as S.T.A.L.K.E.R's are often a people best left uncrossed.

In their hands the issue of game weaponry becomes more urgent. Rather than weapons being something for the player to collect out of curiosity or preference, the way in which we create these weapons leads them to have a very real purpose.

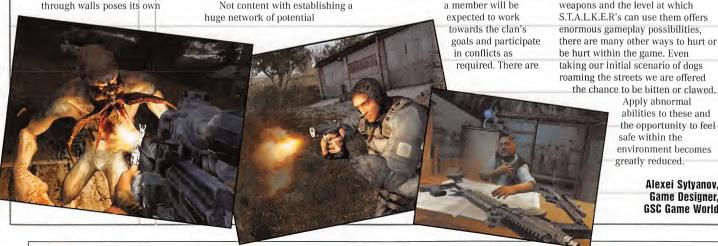
There will be around forty types of weapons in the game covering all manner of combat types from long range to close quarters. Given that the game is set in Ukraine, these weapons will be primarily ex-USSR in design and origin. In addition there are also weapons of western design currently in development.

Each weapon has its own parameters so as to create a tool that adds to the environment of realism. Firing patterns, effectiveness and piercing ability (on all types of surface) start the complexity of the task at hand. When you consider shockwaves, fragmentation and directional explosions then a picture of the opportunities afforded become clear. Weapons can even misfire which raises the importance of technical service throughout

Of course, whilst the range of weapons and the level at which S.T.A.L.K.E.R's can use them offers enormous gameplay possibilities, there are many other ways to hurt or be hurt within the game. Even taking our initial scenario of dogs roaming the streets we are offered

> Apply abnormal abilities to these and the opportunity to feel safe within the environment becomes greatly reduced.

> > Alexei Sytyanov, Game Designer. **GSC Game World**



DIVIDITY BEYODD

The most acclaimed RPG of 2002 has spawned a sequel, Beyond Divinity is the widely anticipated follow-up to Divine Divinity. In this latest and most immersive tale, you are soul-forged with a Death Knight. Your fate is to spend the rest of eternity bonded to this creature of evil, unless you can undo this curse.

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Beyond Divinity is a standalone adventure set in the award winning Divinity universe.

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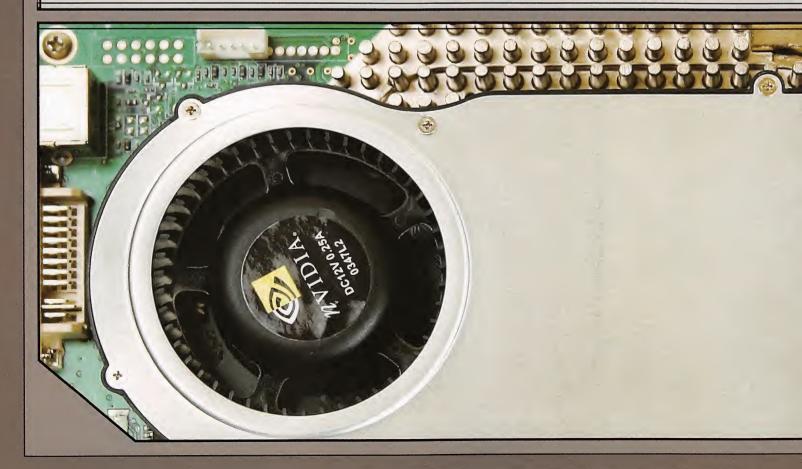








TWICE AS DICE





ATI AND NVIDIA'S NEXT GENERATION CHIPSETS GO HEAD-TO-HEAD



James Bannan and Bennett Ring report back from the lab...

ike the orbits of the planets, the changing of the Earth's weather seasons and the bout of crappy new reality TV shows launched at the start of every ratings period, video card releases follow their own predictable timetable. Every couple of years the big two graphics players, ATI and NVIDIA, release a new GPU (Graphics Processing Unit) that has major changes over its last GPU. These chips are still based on some of the core technologies used by the prior generation, but overall there are major changes to the chip design. The result is usually a significant increase in the oomph factor. Unfortunately for performance worshipping gamers, these kinds of major changes aren't cheap. When we say not cheap, we actually mean ridiculously expensive; NVIDIA pumped a whopping US\$400 Million into its latest chip design. As a result, these kinds of releases only take place around once every couple of years.

However, in order to persuade gamers to keep hocking all of their parents' unused white goods in the time between these major updates, the companies release "refresher" products. These are incremental improvements over the initial chip design and generally offer performance improvements of anywhere between 10% and 20% - nowhere near that offered by the major releases.

Smart consumers understand this product cycle (as will you after reading this amazingly educational feature intro!) and therefore only buy a new video card when it's a major product release. Now, those readers who regularly tune into CSI/Monk/Without a Trace/Generic Crime Show might have guessed that due to the fact this is a 12 page feature devoted to only two video cards, we've reached that time once again. Both NVIDIA and ATI have released major new architectures and as a result PC gaming has taken a giant leap forwards. I'm excited!

Two hearts that beat as one

For the purposes of this story, James Bannan was flown half way around the world to Toronto, Canada, where he attended ATI's shader day, and where he was meant to pick up a review sample of the new RADEON. Unfortunately the card was delayed and almost didn't make it in time, causing more than a few new grey hairs amongst the PCPP staff. As James had attended the ATI conference, it fell upon him to test the ATI card. Lucky sod.

At the same time I (Bennett) was invited to attend the NVIDIA Editor's Day, but due to prior commitments was unable to make it. Thankfully my operation went well, and I'm now legally female.

Not to worry, as the main presentation was handily posted on the Net as an .avi, as well as the obligatory PowerPoint demonstrations, and our GeForce sample arrived nice and early. So I was the lucky fella chosen to benchmark the new GeForce. By myself.

Due to the wonders of the Interweb, our miraculous modern telephone system and occasionally on time couriers, both James and I were able to test on identical systems, even though he's based in Melbourne while I'm in Sydney. Amazing huh?

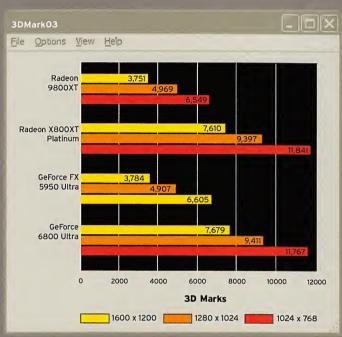
Our test systems were comprised of the ABIT 1S7 motherboard (865PE chipset), a 3.4GHz Northwood Pentium 4 (thanks Intel for the loan!) with HyperThreading enabled, two 256MB sticks of Corsair DDR400 memory running in dual channel mode, and a Seagate 160GB IDE100 hard drive. A clean install of Windows XP with Service Pack 1 and DirectX9.0b was installed on said hardware, before the most benchmarks ever seen in the history of print magazines were thrown at these testbenches. Ok, so it's probably not the most benchmarks ever seen in the history of print magazines, but it's got to be close.

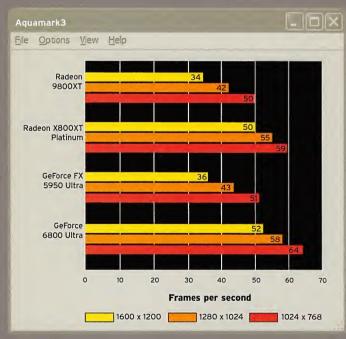
Without a doubt ATI was the winner of the previous round of the graphics card slugfest with its 9700 and 9800 cards, but NVIDA aren't the type of company to just sit back and take it. As a result, unprecedented amounts of time and money were pumped into both ATI and NVIDIA's new architectures. Let's see which one comes out on top...

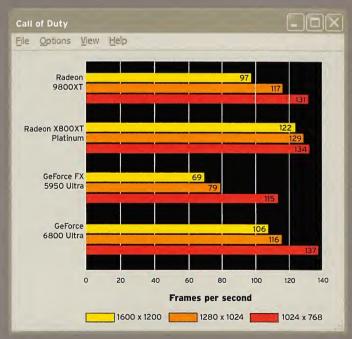
WHOOSH!

How does a performance leap of around twice the speed of the prior generation sound to you? We were rather impressed as well. If the PC technology wasn't light years ahead of the consoles before, it's positively left them choking in its dust now. And unlike the previous generation of video cards, we won't need to wait twelve months for games to show up that make the most of these architectures. We've already got games on the shelves now, such as FarCry and LOMAC, which demand the performance boost offered by these speed demons, and Doom III, Half Life 2 and a plethora of other framerate-sucking titles are just around the corner.









RADEON X800XT Platinum

The ATI RADEON X800XT Platinum is based on the R420 chip and is, as expected, bigger, stronger and faster than its predecessor – the RADEON 9800XT. On the surface, this seems little more than ATI simply continuing the trend in graphics technology development, but on closer inspection, this card contains some fantastic innovations for high-definition games and gaming development.

ATi's thought processes behind the card are very interesting, but firstly, some specs! The RADEON X800XT Platinum (the eXTreme version, as opposed to the slightly lower-specced Pro version) sports:

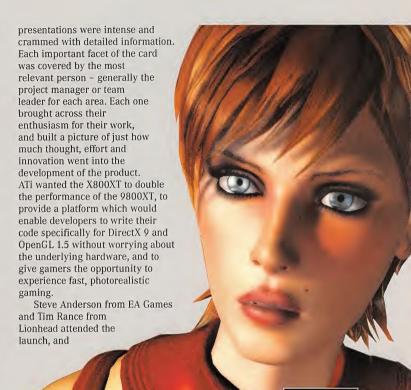
- · 160 million transistors
- 500MHz graphics engine
- 256MB of GDDR3 RAM running at 1GHz
- 16 pixel pipelines arranged in fourpipe clusters
- 6 Vertex shader pipelines processing 750 million vertices/second
- · 32GB/sec memory bandwidth
- 80 concurrent shader operations per clock cycle
- 8.8 Gigapixel/second fill rate
- · 256 bit memory interface
- · PCI-Express ready

- Full compatibility with DirectX 9.0 and OpenGL 1.5
- · HD image quality through:
- 3Dc high-res normal map compression technology
- SmoothVision HD with temporal anti-aliasing (doubles effective AA quality with no performance hit)
- · Single-slot cooling
- Lower power drain than RADEON 9800 XT
- · Available in SFF format

As you can see, it has glistening pecs, well-defined abs and a PhD – in other words it's faster, stronger and smarter, which is good news for everyone.

The Launch

"We believe that the R420 is the world's fastest graphics chip", said Rick Bergman, the Senior VP of ATi, who later complained that there were no semi-naked women attending to him for the launch. Apparently journos at the 9800XT launch mentioned that they would have preferred an in-depth technical presentation of the product rather than the smoke and mirrors – and he accused us all of "taking away one of the few perks" of his job! He certainly delivered, though. The



GeForce 6800 Ultra



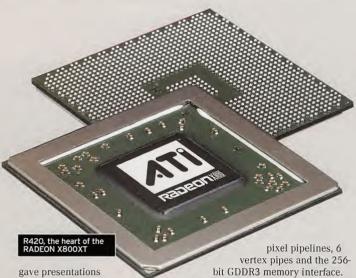
Let's be brutally honest. NVIDIA didn't just fumble the graphics card ball with its NV3X line of GPUs (which were used in the GeForceFX 5800, 5900 and 5950 video cards), it basically tripped right over it, landing on its face and smashing its nose into a fine red pulp. It then sat on the sidelines as ATI, a company once seen as only good for budget solutions, and its R3XX GPUs (as seen in the 9700 and 9800 video cards) kept on scoring goal after goal.

A couple of key reasons can be identified as the cause of NV3X series' problems. First and foremost appear to be manufacturing issues. While we applaud the courage in NVIDIA's decision to try the (at the time) unproven low-k dielectric process, this gamble simply didn't pay off. Likewise with the move to a 0.13 micron manufacturing process. In theory both of these technologies should have led to significant benefits for NVIDIA's chips, but difficulties with the processes led to extensive product delays and heat issues.

Another problem was NVIDIA's collaboration with Microsoft in the development of DirectX9. From what

we can gather the relationship started off well enough, but things soon turned sour between the happy couple. Eventually NVIDIA withdrew from the development of DX9 - leaving ATI to cuddle up next to Bill on those cold and lonely nights. As a result NVIDIA went ahead with a design that used 32-bit floating point precision, while ATI used 24-bit precision, the bare minimum allowed by the DX9 spec. While NVIDIA's higher precision allowed for more accurate calculations, it resulted in lower performance than the 24-bit design of ATI, and it was impossible to see any improvement in NVIDIA's image quality in existing games.

Also, the initial choice of a 128-bit memory bus left the NV30 severely lacking in memory bandwidth compared to ATI's 256-bit memory bus. Thankfully NVIDIA rectified this with the NV35 design, and as a result performance at higher resolutions came very close to that of ATI's 9800XT. But by then it was a case of too little too late. Finally, the fact that NVIDIA was discovered doing a little trimming around the edges when it came to image quality, obviously in a bid to boost the



gave presentations
on two upcoming titles
- Medal of Honour: Pacific
Assault and Black & White 2, and
how these games have been
influenced by the technologies made
available by the X800XT. This was a
nice touch - it enabled everyone to
hear about the card's relevance from
the gaming industry's perspective.

And, incidentally, the games looked phenomenal.

The Beast Revealed

The core architecture of the X800XT lies in its VPU (the R420 chip), 16

the VPU is the latest 0.13 micron low-k copper process, courtesy of TSMC. This allows for approximately 33% more transistors than the 9800XT (which used 0.15 micron), and enables the transistors to run around 100MHz faster without any increase in power utilisation or heat buildup. The copper interconnects have a much lower resistance than the aluminium ones used in the 9800 XT, resulting in faster and more efficient electrical signalling.

The memory interface is comprised of four 64-bit (256-bit) GDDR3 channels. Information is managed via a switch and fed to and from the memory controllers (of which there are four), and managed by the bus controller. The GDDR3 memory, which is designed to run at higher clock speeds than DDR and DDR2 memory, incorporates signal terminators within the modules themselves, which simplifies the board design. This system layout results in a 50% higher number of memory clock cycles than the 9800XT. Signal efficiency has also been targeted, with redundancy in place to minimise wasted cycles and reduce the amount of unutilised

channels during each cycle.

The vertex processing engine contains six vertex shading units running in parallel, which equates to up to 12 vertex shader operations per clock cycle - twice the performance of the 9800XT. Each engine incorporates two ALUs (Arithmetic Logic Units) – a 128-bit floating point vector ALU and a 32bit scalar floating point ALU. The setup engine handles geometry management, assigning texture coordinates, colour and Z values to vertex data, converting vertices into polygons. It then distributes the load evenly across the available pixel pipelines, of which there are 16.

The pixel pipelines are divided into four groups of quad pipelines, a configuration which is very scalable, as a group can be turned off for lower performance and cost saving, or switched on for greater performance. Not to mention that often flaws in the manufacturing process might necessitate the disabling of one of these groups. For example, the slightly slower RADEON X800 Pro supports 12 instead of 16 of these pipelines, while the surrounding architecture remains unchanged. Each pipeline

lagging performance of the NV3X chips, didn't help matters either.

But as my granddaddy was fond of saying, if you fall off your horse there's only one way to conquer your fear of getting back on; shoot it in the head and go buy yourself a convertible. This is exactly what NVIDIA has done with the uncooperative bucking bronco that was the NV3X0 series, killing if off and building most of the NV40 core, the heart of the GeForce 6800 Ultra, from scratch. This is quite a different approach to ATI's R420 core, which isn't too different from its previous chip architecture.

A new chip on the block

According to Ujesh Desai, General Manager of Desktop Products at NVIDIA, when designing the NV40 chip, the company's "number one focus area was performance". Their goal was to ensure that "the GeForce 6800 was the fastest performing product on the market, period." We'll delve into the benchmarks in a little bit to see if they accomplished this, but it's obvious to see that NVIDIA has made some significant performance improvements. In fact, it's the largest generational performance jump NVIDIA has ever

made between products.

During the product launch the co-founder of NVIDIA, Jen-Hsung Huang, threw around some very interesting figures regarding NV40:

These feed into and from the various

instruction areas - 2D engine, Video

Processing Engine, Setup Engine,

Smoothvision HD, HyperZ HD, AGP

interface and the display interfaces.

This architecture is almost identical

to the 9800XT, but each component

either through hardware alterations

or smarter processing. The aim was

9800XT, but rather to improve on

the characteristics which make it

The silicon technology used in

has been enhanced considerably,

not to radically redesign the

such a good performer.

- NV40 cost over US\$400 million to develop.
- During the life of this chip, over 1000 engineers will have worked on it.
- These engineers used a server room 10000 feet square, with 5000 CPUs and 400 Terabytes of disk space, to design the chip.
- Each NV40 chip has 222 million transistors, yet is around the same size as a thumb nail.
- 260,000 of these transistors would fit in a single pollen spore.
- There is 2.4km of copper wire in every NV40 chip.
- Link a dozen NV40 chips together and you'll have a sentient system, which will then use the Internet to take control of the world's defence networks, before launching a devastating nuclear attack against humanity.
- Ok, I made that up that last point.

 Another major focus for NVIDIA with the release of this GPU was a move towards the Consumer Electronics industry. Just like every

bloody other IT hardware manufacturer on the planet. This one point from Jen-Hsung's presentation makes NVIDIA's intentions blindingly clear: "Fundamentally, what we're going to try to do is to reposition the GPU, if you will, so that now it is the engine of the digital media era and nothing short of being the processor of consumer electronics". Join the queue buddy.

The main feature of the NV40 that should help it enter the CE space is the inclusion of an on chip

video processor, which lowers CPU utilisation during video playback. Hardware acceleration of video isn't anything new, but NVIDIA claims that this is the first ever dedicated video processor integrated into a GPU, so it will be interesting to see if it does actually make any difference.

Laying the pipe

When it comes to graphics card performance, one of the crucial elements is how many pixel pipelines and texture units are in the design, and in this regard NV40 has seen a major increase over NV3X. Instead of a 4 x 2 design













has its own pixel shader and texture unit, and is independent of all the other pipelines.

The pixel shader units can process up to five floating point instructions per clock cycle each. The layout of the architecture is designed to increase the efficiency of ordering the instructions, as well as reducing latency caused by failed instructional look-ups. So, should an instruction be waiting on information from an operation which has stalled, it will simply process any other outstanding information, rather than hold up the entire operation.

Easy On The Eye

A concept which ATi is pushing very strongly with the X800XT is that of high-definition gaming. This probably has something to do with the fact that they're supplying the graphics for Xbox 2, which has to be HD compatible. Similar to the idea of HDTV, HD gaming aims to enhance video games with high framerates at the largest resolutions, shading, smoothing and photorealistic image quality. To achieve this, the X800XT features enhanced SMARTSHADER, SMOOTHVISION and HYPER Z technologies (all of which were part

of the 9800 series), and introduces a new feature called 3Dc, which is a texture compression tool.

SMARTSHADER HD handles the pixel and vertex shading operations on the card. Its implementation on the X800XT cards has been enhanced by increasing the dedicated resources available for shading, enabling developers to create shaders which are not limited by instruction count, registers or texture count.

The six vertex shaders on the X800XT can each process two instructions per cycle at full 32-bit precision. This equates to around 700 million operations per second, which is double that of the 9800XT.

The sixteen pixel shader units can each handle five parallel shader operations simultaneously – two vector, two scalar and one texture operation. This works out to around 40 billion operations per second, approximately 2.5 times the capability of the 9800XT. All the operations are carried out at 24-bit precision, and can automatically decompress DXTC, S3TC and 3Dc texture compression.

The number of temporary registers available to the pixel shaders has been bumped up from



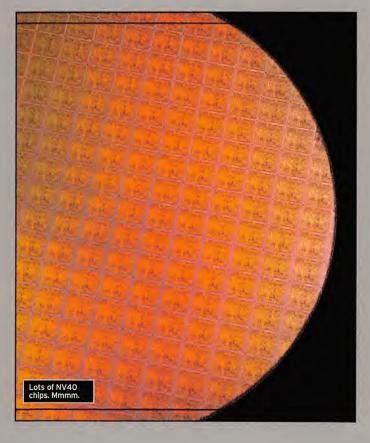
12 to 32. Register efficiency has been targeted, so that performance is not dependant on the number of registers being used. This enables developers to avoid coding problems associated with unpredictable shading performance. Additionally, the maximum number of shader instructions has been dramatically boosted from 160 to 1536 – 512 separate vector, scalar and texture instructions.

SMOOTHVISION HD is ATi's implementation of high-quality

image rendering, which generally incorporates anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering. In the X800 it also includes 3Dc texture map compression.

Similar to the 9800XT, the X800XT offers 2X, 4X and 6X multisampled AA settings. Colour and Z values for each sample are also compressed during the AA operation, resulting in a negligible performance hit at the 2X and 4X levels.

The biggest enhancement to AA on the X800XT is Temporal Anti-



(four pipelines with two texture units each) as seen in NV3X, NV40 brings a 16 x 1 design to the table. The theoretical effect of this is at least a doubling in performance.

Memory bandwidth on the GeForce 6800 Ultra has also been given a shot in the arm, thanks to is its full native Shader Model 3.0 support. Well, we're not actually sure if it really is that noteworthy, but it's the feature that NVIDIA's marketing machine keeps harping on about.

We're guessing that the reason NVIDIA is so keen to promote this

The most noteworthy feature of NVIDIA's card is its full native Shader Model 3.0 support

the use of 256Mb of 550MHz GDDR-3 memory over a 256-bit memory bus. This has resulted in an incredible 35GB/sec of memory bandwidth, so it's no wonder that the 6800 Ultra churns through high resolution graphics without breaking a sweat. In fact, NVIDIA recommended that we do all benchmarks at 1600 x 1200 resolution, as this is where the real benefits of this card start to shine.

Shadey characters

Apart from the obvious kick in the performance pants that NV40 has bought to the table, the most noteworthy feature of NVIDIA's card

feature is because ATI's competing card is still stuck using Shader Model 2.0. It's like the old 256MB vs 128MB video cards – in most circumstances it makes sweet F.A. difference to performance, but Joe Bloggs is much more likely to buy the card with a bigger number plastered all over the box.

However, there are several key new features of Shader Model 3.0, all of which help to make me sound really smart if I mention them. These include:

• Infinite length pixel shaders Shader Model 2.0 limits shader length to 96 instructions, but version 3.0 brings this up to a virtually



3Dc is designed to alleviate the memory storage and bandwidth limitations being faced by game designers

Aliasing. This is targeted at enhancing image quality when games are running at frame rates which are the same or greater than the refresh rate of the screen, the idea being that excess frames provide no benefit to quality. Temporal AA works by using two sampling patterns, and alternating the patterns between frames. Effectively, this results in twice the number of samples and a much clearer image with no performance hit. When the frame rate drops below the refresh rate, the card reverts to standard MSAA (multi-sampled).

Anisotropic filtering has been enhanced through the use of better algorithms than used on previous RADEON cards. They have been designed to increase the filtering speed at each level of AF without impacting image quality or performance.

3Dc is designed to alleviate the memory storage and bandwidth limitations being faced by game designers currently using the DXTC (DirectX Texture Compression) format and S3TC (the OpenGL counterpart) for compressing normal maps and texture data. It works by breaking up each texture map into 4x4 blocks each containing 16 values, consisting of two components each - these are compressed separately. Each block is assigned a maximum and minimum value (stored as 8-bit values), and then each component is assigned a 3-bit index value based on their position within the block. These positions are calculated as intermediate values

between the maximum and minimums. The result is a 128-bit compressed block. As the original block was 512 bits, this represents a 4:1 compression ratio.

The benefits of this are huge – higher resolutions and greater detail of textures within existing memory restrictions, lower memory impact of existing textures and hardware accelerated decompression, resulting in a negligible performance impact. New mapping techniques being devised, such as Virtual Displacement Mapping, offer much greater 3D texturing, while running at the same performance levels as standard mapping.

HYPER Z HD is responsible for ordering polygons through their assigned Z values, and calculating resulting visible pixels. This is to ensure maximum processing efficiency, as pixels which are effectively blocked by polygons with a higher Z-value are discarded and not rendered. This is called the Hierarchical Z test. HYPER Z HD also includes a feature called the Early Z test, which quickly tests the potential visibility of individual pixels, enhancing the efficiency of discarding pixels before they reach

infinite number. This allows for much more complicated pixel shader effects. There's a slight problem though – nobody knows how much of a performance hit NVIDIA's card is going to suffer when running long, taxing shaders, as there aren't games on the market yet that have particularly complex shaders. Unfortunately it's likely that these will cause a significant hit, and therefore won't be commonly used.

• Dynamic flow control
If you've ever done basic
programming, you're probably
intimately familiar with loops and
branches, and Shader Model 3
finally allows programmers to use
these features in shader programs.
This makesprogramming
shaders considerably easier, and
should lead to more efficient
shader design.

· Instancing

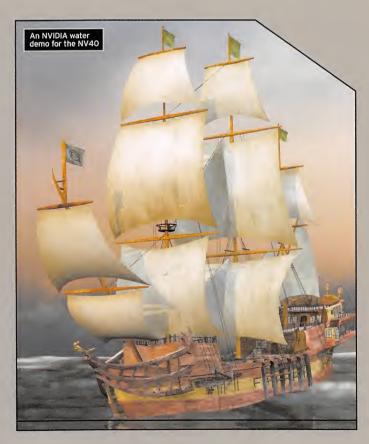
When rendering multiple identical objects, this technique removes a large amount of the overhead associated with this repetitive task. It should allow for a large performance increase when rendering a large number of identical objects.

• Displacement mapping
This is likely to be the feature of

Shader Model 3.0 that gamers will notice the most. It's kind of like bump mapping, but instead of faking a 3D surface over the polygon, it generates a true 3D surface. The beauty of this technique is that it doesn't require additional polygons to add this extra detail, and thus has less of a performance hit. Alas, there aren't any games that support this feature... yet. And according to some developers, it mightn't be until 2006 that we start to see games developed with Shader Model 3.0 hit shelves. By which time you'll have probably given your NV40 to your grandparents to use in their word processing/web browsing box.

As mentioned earlier, NVIDIA's GPU offers true 32-bit floating point precision in its shaders, but this is likely to only make a difference with very complicated shaders. And these types of shaders are likely to be too performance hungry to be actually used in games.

We're inclined to think that the emphasis on promoting Pixel Shader 3.0 comes from within NVIDIA's marketing department, and an extremely questionable demo during the NV40 launch presentation helps to back this up.





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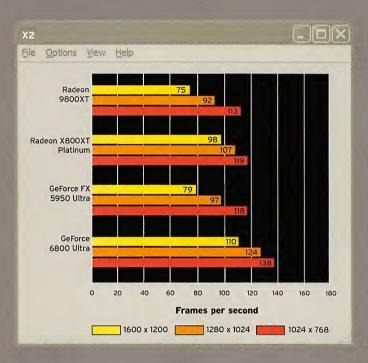
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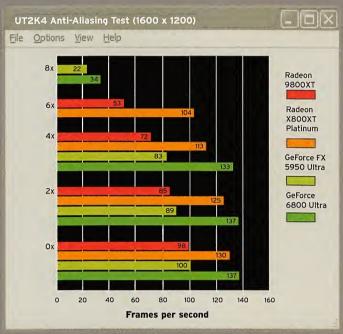
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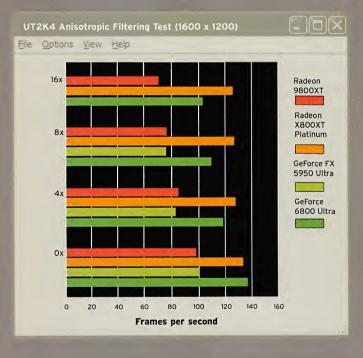
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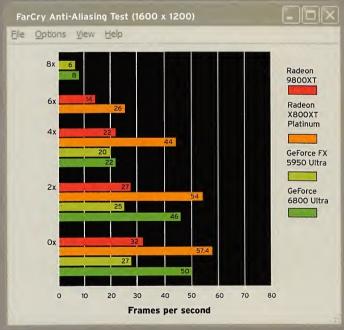
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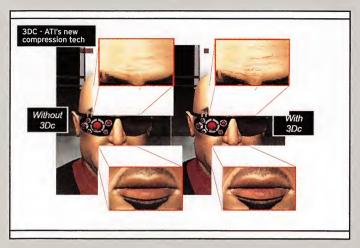












the rendering engine, and can discard up to 256 pixels per clock cycle. This, in conjunction with the Hierarchical Z test now being available at resolutions up to 1600x1200 and 1920x1080 (HD), results in much greater performance gains at the higher end.

Photorealism is a VERY important component of the X800XT's push towards high definition gaming. The human eye doesn't believe images which are too sharp and clear – there actually

need to be artefacts and flaws in any picture to make it look real.

Depth of field techniques have been developed to draw the eye's focus to either foreground, background or middle-ground action, by blurring the unimportant part of the image. Soft shadows are also being implemented into skin texture mapping, which are far more realistic than hard-edged shadows, which tend to result in a harsh, plastic look. Complex light interactions with material like glass

or water are now possible, and subsurface light scattering effects are being used to achieve translucency in materials like marble and skin. Reflection is also being captured from miniscule particles like dust or smoke to achieve greater atmospheric effects.

These techniques are great in themselves, but the X800XT's architecture has been designed to make them feasible in real-time. The next generation of games is going to look awesome...

So what do we think?

This is not the card to buy if all you care about is speed and raw power. The X800XT can crunch numbers with the best of them, no doubts there, but it was designed with quality in mind, and the benchmarks reflect this.

This is a card that LIKES running at high resolutions. It's designed to implement high image quality with a minimal performance hit, keeping framerates nice and high for fussy gamers.

Typically, enabling AA doesn't produce a noticeable performance hit until you reach the 6X AA mark at 1600 x 1200, and even then performance is still at an acceptable

level. Additionally, the card can handle very high levels of anisotropic filtering without blinking. Combined with the temporal AA feature, you could run it constantly at 4X TAA (8X MSAA effective) / 16X AF / 1600x1200 and still expect great performance. Amazing stuff.

And image quality is what it's all about - benchmarking the card was a visual treat. High-resolution scenes rendered smoothly; maxedout quality settings produced no visual performance drop; there was no clipping, no strange artefacts... nothing cringe-worthy at all, in fact.

This is a damn good card. It's thought-through, comprehensive and compelling. Looks good, handles great, and is a pleasure to work with!



To illustrate the supposed benefits of Pixel Shader 3.0, NVIDIA used two shots of FarCry. The first showed a very simplified scene, with ugly water and crappy bump mapping. The second showed FarCry the way we're used to seeing it, with a wealth of special effects and eye candy. The presenter suggested that the second image was a result of Pixel Shader 3.0, but what he neglected to mention was that the first image was using Pixel Shader 1.1, not 2.0.

But anybody who has played FarCry, and trust me there are plenty of us, immediately recognised this for the blatant misrepresentation that it was. This is something that NVIDIA really needs to learn not to do – PC gamers are a relatively savvy bunch who don't appreciate it when a company tries to pull the wool over their eyes. And considering that the card is pretty damn quick anyway, this propaganda did more harm than good.



The added cost of a 480W PSU puts the GeForce 6800 Ultra at a distinct disadvantage

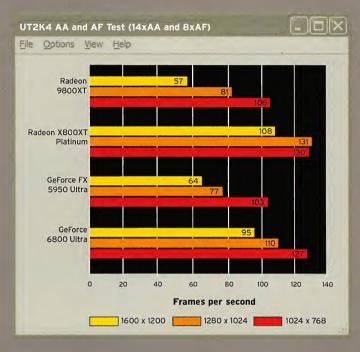
Feel the Power!

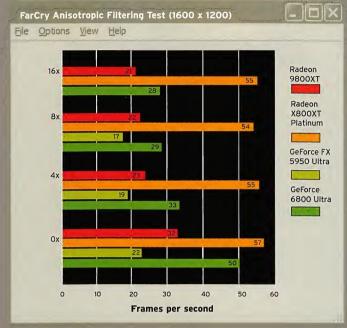
As we mentioned before, NV40 has an incredible 220 million transistors. To put that into perspective, that's a third more than Intel's Pentium 4 Extreme Edition CPU. Yowsers. Running so many transistors has resulted in a bit of a problem - power usage. Put simply, the AGP port can't supply enough juice to run the video card. This is nothing new though, as the previous generation of cards also needed a direct connection from your PSU to keep them going. However, a single connection is now no longer enough to power the NV40. You'll need two molex connections from your PSU, both of which can't be shared with any other devices, which is obviously going to be a problem for many. However, most surprising of all is the fact that NVIDIA recommends the PSU be a 480W brute! This is likely to be a major deterrent for many users, as 480W

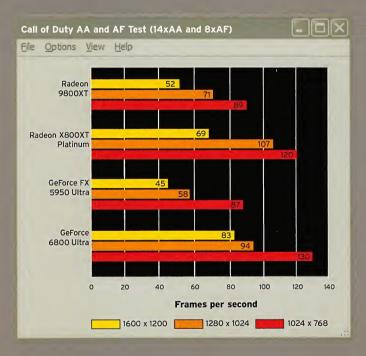
PSUs aren't yet commonplace. Considering ATI's solution doesn't need anything more than a standard 300W PSU, the added cost of a 480W PSU puts the GeForce 6800 Ultra at a distinct disadvantage.

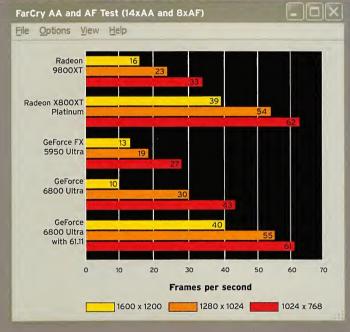
All of these power hungry transistors have resulted in a relatively hot video card. Once again the GeForce has a double slot cooling solution, but it's not as noisy as the dustbuster that was the 5800. However, it is noticeably louder than ATI's cooling solution, and its large size means SFF PC owners will be out of luck.

There's no doubting that the NV40, and the GeForce 6800 Ultra that is based around it, represent a major step up for NVIDIA in the performance stakes. Its support of Shader Model 3.0 makes it a more advanced card than ATI's offering, but whether or not this actually means anything to real world game performance is unknown.









Performance

Judging the performance of these two cards wasn't an easy task, as we had some major problems with NVIDIA's drivers. NVIDIA had recommended that we use the Quality mode when benchmarking, rather than High Quality, and a few screenshots proved that Quality mode was indeed equal to that of ATI's highest quality. However, we noticed absolutely no performance hit when moving from Quality up to High Quality, which was the opposite of what NVIDIA had suggested, and which they could not explain. As a result all testing was done at the High Quality setting.

Confusing the matter even more were the 61.11 drivers that NVIDIA supplied a day before our review sample of the GeForce had to go to another mag. While these boosted

the performance of FarCry enormously, they also introduced unacceptable drops in image quality, such as vegetation pop-up and the lack of fog effects. As a result we stuck with the 60.72 drivers that were originally supplied with the card, and that had been verified by Futuremark as not containing IO cheats. However, even these drivers still exhibited a few issues with FarCry, while ATI's ran perfectly.

As you can see from the benchmark results, it was a very close race between the two cards. It's safe to say that without AA and AF enabled, the GeForce 6800 Ultra had the lead, but usually not by a huge margin. Turn on the eye candy though, and it's a different story, with the RADEON X800XT Platinum taking the lead, often by a significant amount.

The FarCry results were very strange indeed. Most online reviews show the RADEON as having a performance lead of around 20% in this game. Our results, when using the NVIDIA 60.72 drivers and 4XAA, 8XAF at 1600 x 1200, showed the RADEON being approximately four times as fast. Obviously something strange was going on. We reinstalled the NVIDIA card with a fresh driver install, yet it kept scoring very low. When we used the new 61.11 drivers, performance leapt up to that of the RADEON, but as mentioned earlier we saw some significant image quality issues. As a result we can't conclusively use these results, as NVIDIA's drivers were obviously buggy with this game at the time of testing, so take them with a grain of salt.

By the end of the benchmarking

we'd come to the conclusion that the RADEON had the edge over the GeForce when it came to performance. If you're buying one of these cards you definitely want to use AA and AF, and in these circumstances the RADEON consistently beat the GeForce. It's also got the benefit of requiring less power and space in your PC.

One thing is for sure, both of these cards are very fast, and the gap between the two has narrowed considerably since the last generation. Right now ATI is at the top of the heap, but driver optimisations and development of Shader Model 3.0 support could well see NVIDIA having the last laugh. Either way, PC graphics have taken a giant leap forward, and gamers are going to be the winners regardless of which card they purchase.





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SONY.











BATTLE FIELD 2

The flashpoints of the future world order are coming soon to your PC screen. **Ed Dawson** is on the ground yelling "Go! Go! Go!"...

The game of the moment is Battlefield 2, which looks like one of the very best games in the multiplayer pipeline. Launching in 2005, the game is set to radically enhance the already popular Battlefield experience, delivering a new standard of spectacular graphics rendering, allowing over 100 players and streamlining the interface, making it more accessible for mainstream gamers.

Watching Battlefield 2 in action, you're confronted with a blistering shootout in a dense urban area. Three-storey concrete apartment blocks stand in the blazing midday sun. Graffiti slogans in Arabic are splashed on walls within the residential labyrinth, dotted with rusting vehicles and hanging lines of laundry.

We're following a squad of US Marines, moving from cover to cover in their distinctive helmets and desert camouflage. A very "Desert Combat" style of soundtrack plays in the background, a seemingly familiar combination of military percussion and wailing Arabic pipes, with a beat verging on hip-hop.

The squad leader opens up a radial menu which shows commands like Move, Defend, Clear Area and New Objective. He chooses Move, so the team jogs forward, arrayed in a combat formation as they go.

Suddenly an explosion rocks the scene. Numerous enemies begin firing from all directions, from windows, balconies and dark entranceways. An impossibly detailed tank rolls into view, casting a dark shadow onto the street. Its turret swivels and immediately begins strafing the walls with heavy machine gun fire, sending jets of powderised concrete and broken chunks blasting into the street.

Some rounds pepper a parked vehicle, which sounds a wailing anti-theft alarm, adding to the already deafening chaos of machine gun fire, staccato bullet impacts and explosions. The soldier crouching

behind the car takes fire - heavy machine gun rounds will cut straight through civilian cars as though they're big blocks of butter.

An enemy is neutralised in the firefight - hit by a launched grenade - and falls from a high balcony with obvious "rag-doll" dynamics controlling his macabre descent and grisly impact with the macadam.

Meanwhile, the battle rages on...

A rocket hits an improvised

A rocket hits an improvised barricade, sending tyres, fragments of wooden planks and 44-gallon drums cascading onto the road. The drums twirl as they fall, rolling and tumbling with believable physics characteristics. One of them is flung with lethal velocity, and it floors one of our protagonists. Blackhawk and Cobra choppers join the fray, but have difficulty getting a good angle of attack from above the roofline. Things are turning bad for the Marines.

Our view suddenly switches to another character, lurking on a rooftop nearby. He produces a mobile data terminal, the screen alive with map data and live combat information. This is the Commander. We see his view become a detailed map of the city. He places a waypoint, then radios a command: "Clear the area!"

Our view changes to bright, clear skies above the clouds. An F15e fighter/bomber jet acknowledges the signal and banks to engage. As the jet approaches the target, we see the co-pilot switch to a special bombing view – from a camera mounted on the underside of the fuselage. We see the munitions fall away on a precise trajectory.

This vision seems to be everything Battlefield fans could have asked for and more. Pitting the weapons and equipment of the US Marines, the Chinese, and a fictional Middle Eastern Coalition against each other, it looks set to be a modern conflict simulation of unparalleled excitement. To find out more details we caught up with Scott Evans, Producer on Battlefield 2, over the page...

ORDERS FROM ABOVE

An interview with Scott Evans, Battlefield 2 Producer

PCPP: Your newly announced project is Battlefield 2. What is the most exciting new feature of this game, for you personally?
SE: There are so many to list, but I'll try to pick one. For me, one of the most satisfying moments is going up in rank and unlocking something cool and new in the game.

PCPP: Battlefield 2 seems to be set in the modern theatre of warfare. Is it set exactly in present times, or are there elements from the future? Will we recognise all the weapons and vehicles?

SE: Most of the weapons and vehicles we are including are being used today - however we are including a few "near future" weapons that are currently in development by various nations.

PCPP: Is this title continuing in the Battlefield theme of conventional warfare, or is there a terrorist or unconventional element in Battlefield 2?

SE: There is no terrorist element in Battlefield 2. We have three armies – the United States, China and a fictional Middle Eastern Coalition which is an organized army.

PCPP: Many people are excited about the new player role of Commander. What sort of impact does this leading player have on the game?

SE: Some of the best moments in Battlefield 1942 / Battlefield Vietnam are when both sides are focusing massive amounts of soldiers and vehicles in a concentrated area. The commander mode allows for more of these "all out war" moments because commanders can easily direct their squads to fronts, which result in frenetic fights over discrete areas on the map.

PCPP: Material penetration is a feature often seen in hardcore "simulator" military games. Does it bring new options to players? SE: Material penetration is a great feature because it adds an extra layer of depth to the game – but not an



extra layer of complexity. Players can still use any object for concealment, but not every object can stop every type of incoming fire. BF2 will teach you the difference between cover and concealment:)

PCPP: Are there new communications options in Battlefield 2? Are you keeping the old F-key operated radio commands?

SE: Yeah definitely. There is a new VOIP system which allows players to communicate in real time. We'll be expanding the old radio key commands as well as introducing a new system that we think will be easier and more useful to players in the midst of the Battlefield mayhem.

PCPP: Everybody knows about Desert Combat, the mod for Battlefield 1942 by Trauma Studios. Is the Desert Combat team involved in the development of Battlefield 2? If so, how?

SE: DICE, Trauma and EA have a close working relationship. Beyond that, we are not ready to divulge any more details.

PCPP: Screenshots that we've seen show some pretty amazing urban environments. Is improving the environments a major goal on Battlefield 2?

SE: In Battlefield 2 we feature an allnew rendering engine. This allows us to accomplish some pretty amazing visual feats, such as the screenshots you mentioned. Our goal is to bring the battlefield to life like never before.

PCPP: Battlefield 1942 and
Battlefield Vietnam both feature
quite a complex process to access
the map, choose spawn points and
start playing. Is there any
improvement on this in Battlefield 2?
SE: Definitely. One of the problems
with the previous Battlefield games
was the fact that it took so many
mouse clicks to get into combat.
We're making it much easier to get
into the combat but that's all we are
saying for now.











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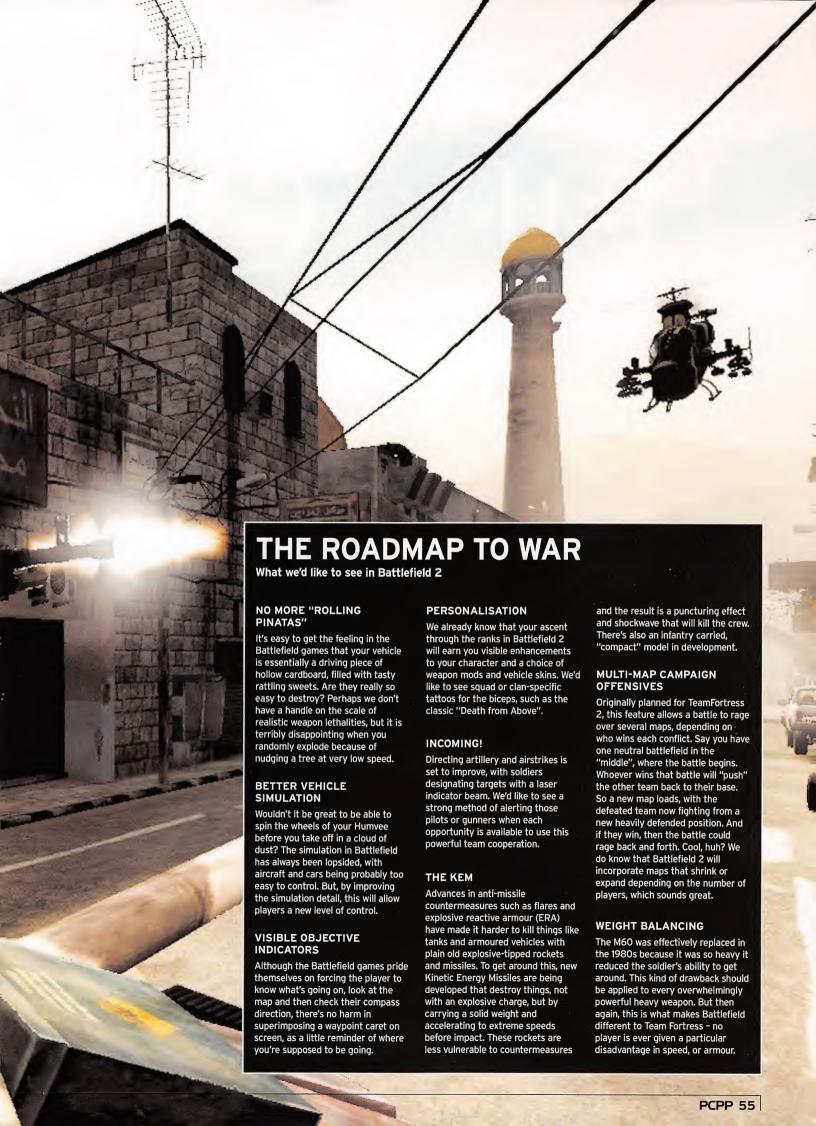
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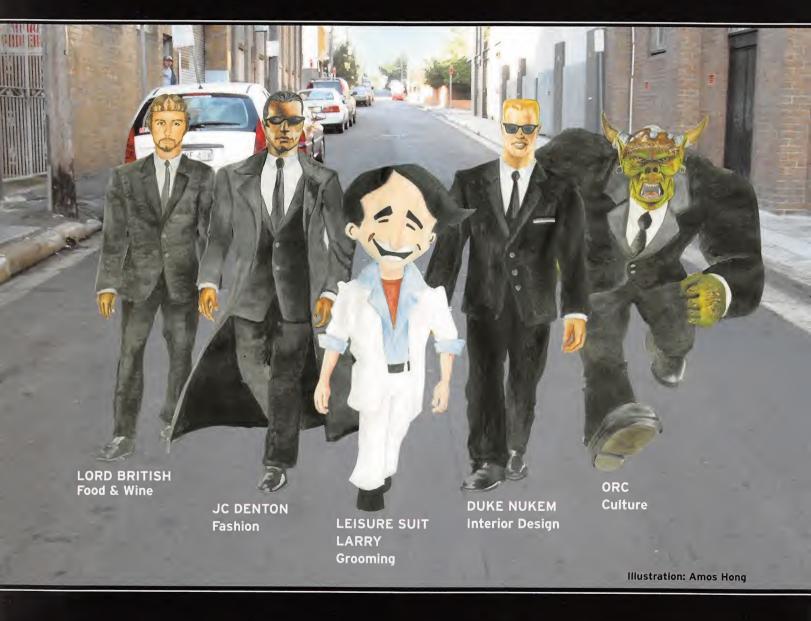






THE THE LANGE OF THE SENTS OF T

PCPP's Best Games of All Time



While the gaming experts on the PCPP team argued over the merits of the best PC games of all time, we couldn't help but think we were missing a crucial alternative point of view. So we called on the Gaming Fab Five to offer their advice. The results were mixed, but always entertaining; some games were totally reinvented, while others showed themselves to be beyond hope. **Timothy C. Best** plays the straight guy as he counts down the list...



SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD

When a psychotic bunny and a deadpan dog hit the road to solve "ridiculously idiotic crimes" then you know you're in for trouble. When you start laughing out loud you know you're in for something special. Memorable characters and ripping dialogue make this pure gold.

Score: NA Developer: LucasArts Released: 1993 Reviewed: NA

100

Score: 94 **Developer:** Core Design Released: 1996 Reviewed: PCPP 9

TOMB RAIDER

Since all of the hot librarians were busy, it was a well-spoken archaeologist who was transformed into gaming's pin-up girl. The oldest, but strongest, of the Lara games, featuring great level design, frantic action, hot-pants and a plot that almost makes sense.





GOTHIC 2

Why do RPGs have to be drab affairs with tiny little characters? Well, Gothic II showed just how fabulous they can be with lush graphics and a real rock-em sockem, combo-fuelled, combat system. With a couple of decent patches it even runs properly.

Score: 76 Developer: Piranha-Bytes Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 90

Score: 89 Developer: SirTech Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 42

JAGGED ALLIANCE 2

Take a squad-based isometric strategy game, add mercenaries with personality disorders and then give them guns big enough to send Freud back to his Momma. Welcome to JA2. Just thinking about it makes us want to hire Commando and fire up a game.



97

98



FLIGHT UNLIMITED 3

This is a game for the obsessive compulsive in each of us; from the nearphotorealistic representation of 10,000 square miles of the US Pacific Northwest, to the meticulously modelled weather and planes specs. FU3 combines Looking-Glass quality with the joy of flight to make something soaring.

Score: 89 Developer: Looking Glass Studios Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 43 96

Score: NA Developer: LucasArts Released: 1993 Reviewed: NA

DAY OF THE TENTACLE

This is another one of those adventure games that proves LucasArts had access to the best drugs in the early 90s. Funny, bizarre and gas from end to end. Can you stop Dr. Fred's purple tentacle? You'd think some penicillin would do the trick



95



WORMS WORLD PARTY

Explosive grannies, detonating sheep, holy hand-grenades and pink - armless worms pulling the trigger makes for one dodgy game premise. In amongst all of the ridiculousness nestles one of the most addictive and well balanced puzzle/ strategy/ squish-'em-up games ever.

Score: 90 Developer: Team 17 Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 62 94

Score: 91 Developer: Microprose Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 25

M1 TANK PLATOON II

In a world filled with flight and racing sims, M1 Tank Platoon takes one back for players who likes their obsessions to be a little more solid. It's detailed, technical and, for armchair armoured core, it's more fun than a howitzer on the set of



SAM & MAX

When you're a homicidal rabbitty-creature on the go it's vital to know how to get blood out of fur. For fresh stains a little hydrogen peroxide will do the trick, otherwise rub cornmeal into the fur against the grain. When you're a character who doesn't wear clothes, grooming is everything.



OUTCAST

An adventure in the strange land of voxels, that was beautifully alien, actionpacked and featured some of the most advanced AI we'd seen in a game. Where else do the inhabitants keep track of where they last saw one another? A real diamond in the rough.

Score: 59 **Developer:** Appeal Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 40

Score: 90 Developer: Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 93

TONY HAWK 4

Extreme sports in videogames haven't been owned this badly since California Games on the Commodore 64. Tony Hawk 4 is an amazing port of the pinnacle of an amazing series, combining endless trick control with street cred that would make Jav-Z crv.



91

92

THE LAST **EXPRESS**

When taking that special someone for a lovely meal on the romantic and mysterious Orient Express always make sure you eat right away because that will cut down on poisoning attempts while giving the boring members of the trip more time to disappear or be murdered, leaving you with just the most interesting people to share your magical day...





GP 500

Strictly for the hardcore, GP 500 makes movies like Torque and Biker Boyz look soft. On full realism, you're in for the kind of ride that makes sim fans want to play wearing a helmet and leathers. Go hard, or get another game,

Score: 96 Developer: Melbourne House Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 43

89 Score: 93 Developer: MicroProse Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 36

ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON

Running an amusement park is one thing, but there's something magical about being able to create your own twisting towers of steel, thrills and heart-stopping terror ... and then getting sim people to pay to go on it. Charming blend of management and Mechano.







BROKEN SWORD 1, 2 & 3

A powerhouse series of contemporary adventure games with sharp dialogue, classic puzzles, intriguing mysteries, secret societies and refreshingly European decor, I know that twists with a broken sword just sound painful, but here they are a pure delight.

Score: 89 Developer: Revolution Software Released: 1996-2003 Reviewed: PCPP 6





PRO PINBALL BIG RACE USA

Without having a table to whack with your hips and paddles to slam, pinball just isn't the same ... unless you are talking Pro Pinball Big Race USA. The soundtracks, the tables and the colour make this the best pinball you'll ever play without working up a sweat.







BATTLEZONE

Battlezone is getting on in years, but this granddaddy of 3D real-time strategy can still run rings around many of the youngsters, combining flowing squad control, tactical resource management, rapid-fire unit construction and firstperson hovertank hanky-panky.

Score: 90 Developer: Activision Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 22

85

Score: 88 Developer: Smoking Car Released: 1997 Reviewed: PCPP 13

THE LAST EXPRESS

Be dragged into the intrigue of the most mysterious mass transit system ever: the Orient Express. Since the plotting doesn't stop when you leave the screen. where you are, and what you observe, changes the course the whole mystery. A marvel of non-linear adventure.



84



MIDNIGHT CLUB 2

This one cracks our top 100 for a pure sensation of arcade speed. Zip between buildings at breakneck speeds, crack the underground racing scene like a bad ioke and take pink slips instead of business cards. Style and speed, baby. Style and speed.

Score: 88 Developer: Rock Star San Diego Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 91

TWINSEN'S **ODYSSEY**

Now some people might say that you're being held back by aging graphics, a strange combat system or odd camera angles, but it's just not the case. Twinsen, repeat after me: mumus are a no, no.



Score: 84 **Developer:** Adeline Released: 1997 Reviewed: PCPP 15

TWINSEN'S ODYSSEY

Twinsen whisks you away to another world where everything is cute and colourful and paratrooper sausage men - who live in bun housing - make sense. Its far-out characters, attention to detail, odd-ball surrounds and off-beat setting all make this a surreal journey that is still a little charmer after all these years.



82



TRAINZ RAILWAY SIMULATOR 2004

Auran came out of the blue with this one and set enthusiast's hearts a-flutter. Trainz is the complete package for model railroad buffs who have to hide their obsession away from wives, not to mention natural disasters like small children. High-detail train-y goodness.

Score: 84 Developer: Auren Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 94





Score: N/A

Developer: Live for Speed Released: 2003 Reviewed: N/A

LIVE FOR SPEED

If excessively accurate racing physics and minute tweaking turns you on, then this will really get your motor running. You can only get this game by downloading it from the webpage but don't let that put you off; this game is high octane.





THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

This is the original and probably the funniest of the Monkey Island games. Think: Pirates of the Caribbean but with vegetarian cannibals and used-ship salesmen. The whole series is well chuckle-worthy so start with the oldest one your PC will run and watch the parrots.

Score: NA Developer: LucasArts Released: 1990 Reviewed: NA 80

Score: 93 Developer: Microprose Released: 1997 Reviewed: PCPP 15

X-COM APOCALYPSE

Apocalypse is the third in the X-Com series and, with the first, defines why alienhunting should be done turn by turn. The combination of troop training, weapons research, base building, open-ended gameplay and nasty surprises and is still tough to beat.





COMBAT MISSION

Combat Mission liberated wargames from hex-based design and it did it with historical nuances, more missions than you can point a bayonet at and a brutal troop morale system that brings missions to life. WWII wargaming at its best. Score: 90 Developer: Big Time Software Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 56 78

Score: 89 Developer: Remedy Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 94

MAX PAYNE 2

Max Payne returns to his tortured world of graphic-novel noir to dispense rough justice and blow the crap out of anything that moves. Like a good action movie, it's a short but sweet trip into style and intensity.





THE LONGEST JOURNEY

Slightly into the future there is a visual artist named April. Soon she is pulled between her world and the land just south of her dreams. Her journey is memorable, exotic and lovely – in other words, it's one heck of an adventure game.

Score: 88 Developer: Funcom Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 68 **76**

74

Score: 96
Developer:
Firaxis
Released: 1999
Reviewed: PCPP 36

ALPHA CENTAURI

Hey, we all know Civilization in space when we see it. Luckily, this game shares the series's class while taking new-age Sci-Fi mumbo jumbo to new levels. Sure, it's pretentious but it's also beautifully written, well-balanced and isn't vaguely educational like the previous games.





ZEUS

When you're city building, fighting off hordes of barbarians and managing a fledgling culture what you really need is the razzle-dazzle of fickle gods to spice things up. Zeus nails the mix of ancient SimCity and divine tantrums to produce something even Hera would like.

Score: 91 Developer: Impression Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 58

Score: 98 Developer: Microprose Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 33

FALCON 4

This is still one of the finest air combat sims you are going to find. The technical detail is outstanding, the dynamic campaign system still shines and, after six years, we've almost had time to finish the manual. Well worth the wait.



MAX PAYNE 2

We know that you're a man who lives only for vengeance, but there is no excuse for that tie. Take a look at X-Com: Apocalypse. The whole world's going to hell, but it still has time explore a retro-look to give its uniforms that special flair. When you have a big date with action, always dress to kill.



ANACHRONOX

Anachronox sees a polished and detailed sci-fi world with a detective noir vibe get drunk and party with Final Fantasy overtones. See if you can find the dreaded TACO (Totally Arbitrary Collectable Object) or have some fun with a superhero.

Score: 85 Developer: Ion Storm Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 65



Score: 91 Developer: Illusion Software Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 80

MAFIA

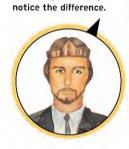
Take a wise-guy filled game set in a mythical 1930s town at the height of prohibition, add in a cinematic feel, Untouchable-style storyline, gang warfare, a massive city and clanking car chases and what you've got is a top 100 game. Capish?



ALIENS V PREDATOR

When selecting a fresh human, you should look for good colour and running speed. Although they're an obvious option you should probably avoid Colonial Marines.

Frozen food looses all of its goodness, very, very quickly. Try prowling parks for power walkers or yoga classes; you'll really



CHAMPIONSHIP

MANAGER 03/04

Aren't you tired of reading

has great personality but

he's not much to look at"?

Arquette when you should

Studio. There are these

people called 3D artists

there, don't be afraid..

Face it vou're David

be David Beckham. I'm going to take you for a full make over at this place called The Animation



ALIENS VS. PREDATOR

The AvP series combined of two of sci-fi's favourite killing machines and then dropped the humans in the middle. Try playing the puppy in the dead of night as your Marine's torch fades and the scuttering of face huggers is getting louder. Scarv, scarv, game,

Score: 96 Developer: Rebellion Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 37

69

Score: 84 Developer: UbiSoft Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 97

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

An enchanting platform game that dabs Disney characters with a touch of Hellraiser, Developed by the same guy who created Rayman, BG&F is filled with excellent mini-games, a twisted little plot and lots of colour. Finally, Jade makes green lipstick look all that.



68



HOMEWORLD

For a game set in the darkness of space Homeworld is sure a thing of beauty. Beyond the colourful nebula and dancing ship-to-ship weapon fire, Homeworld also delivered our first taste of what RTS could really do in 3D. Still an absolute stunner.

Score: 95 Developer: Relic Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 41

67

Score: 93 Developer: Dynamix Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 60

TRIBES 2

A slower pace, large maps, vehicles, soaring jump packs, player classes, power generators and a HUD designed to help co-ordinate teams all combine to make an addictive mix of deep team-play and high-flying action. The tribal look is still in.



66



HAEGEMONIA

Haegemonia takes RTS to the stars and ladles out a healthy scoop of 3D space combat. It combined colony management, spying, tech research, heroes and beautiful battles to make a game more grounded than Homeworld that'll still put you into orbit.

Score: 89 Developer: Digital Reality Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 86

65

Score: 92 Developer: LucasArts Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 31

GRIM FANDANGO

If something starring a travel-agent grim reaper can be considered a work of high art then this game should be hanging somewhere incredibly important. Great writing, slanted humour, beautiful puzzles and stunning Mexican Day of the Dead art design make this one hell of a dance.





SPLINTER CELL

Sam Fisher is a true professional. Players aren't in control of a beefy guy who's sniffed too much flamethrower fluid here, oh, no. Tight action, intelligent encounters and room to plan surgical attacks makes Splinter Cell and experience like no other.

Score: 88 Developer: **Ubi Soft Montreal** Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 85

reviews like "CM is smart, fantastic with figures and 63

Score: 88 **Developer: SSG** Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 73

WARLORDS BATTLECRY 2

Twelve playable races, having your own RPG-style character to run the armies, a free-form campaign, hero quests, hundreds of items and smart AI all make Battlecry 2 good. It's the unassuming quality and silky smooth gameplay that make it great.



62



FLIGHT SIM 2004

This game offers up some of the loveliest skies you'll ever see, great flight dynamics, plus magnificent flying machines stretching back to Orville and Wilbur. As an all-round package, FS2004 just edges out Flight Unlimited 3 as our ticket to the friendly skies.

Score: 88 Developer: Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 90

61



MECHWARRIOR 4 MERCENARIES

Take the hardware-heavy shooter action of the previous Mechwarrior titles and then add a mercenary angle which lets players build their strike force from the ground up and take the missions they choose. Giant robots and cash prizes! Brilliant.





FREEDOM FORCE

Bright colours and a jaunty 50s tone made FF stand out like Superman's undies, but it was the arch-villains, insane plots, freakish powers, outrageous locations and the chance to create your favourite hero that actually made it fly. Simply superb.

Score: 94 Developer: Irrational Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 7

TOMB RAIDER

Yes, I see what you're saving about hot pants and a T-shirt perhaps not being the best choice of clothing for jungle combat, but you know what really worries me? Sometimes I run left, left, up, right, jump and shoot, and then I have a strange compulsion to take all of my clothes off. Is that normal? Am I under some curse? Whenever I ask straight guys they just stare at my breasts and ask me to show them what I mean...

Score: 84 Developer: **Ubi Soft Montreal** Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 84

RAVEN SHIELD

Combat doesn't get much more tense and claustrophobic than this. Planning a mission in methodical detail, setting-up co-ordinated team strikes and experiencing the thrill of it exploding in your face makes for nail-biting action that few games can match.



Score: 88 Developer: Eagle Dynamics Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 95



For modern air conflict this is it. Between the spot-on flight dynamics, avionics, and world interaction, the mighty graphics and choice of eight incredible planes you have one fully fuelled beast ready to go ... if you have the machine to run it.

Score: 84 Developer: Codemasters Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 87

V8 SUPERCARS

V8 Supercars has blown all NASCAR and rally games off the list with its thunderous action. Not only does it come with 13 Championships, 45 race tracks and a full set of cars including 23 rival Holdens and Fords, but there's also a halfdecent story.



60

59

58



DOOM 2

Yes, we're still slipping Doom into our top 100, Sure, it's old but with OpenGL fanupdates it still looks okay, it has more critters than you can point a bloody stump at and, of course, there's the whole nostalgia thing. BFG, here I come.

Score: N/A Developer: id Released: 1994

56

Score: 92 Developer: Released: 2004 Reviewed: PCPP 95

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 03/04

The lack of animation might scare you at first but you quickly forget about pretty pictures as the game eerily becomes like a window into a real world of soccer clashes and backroom intrique. Detail-packed, reactive, and accurate, this game is the goods.



55



C&C GENERALS

When you thrust democracy into a war with communism and terror you have to expect sparks. When you do it in C&C it means big explosions. The three way battles, high-energy gameplay, more realistic forces and Hollywood-inspired 3D effects all help redefine C&C goodness.

Score: 86 Developer: **EA Pacific** Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 86 54

Score: 90 Developer: Konami Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 95

SILENT HILL 3

The Silent Hill games have always been remarkable at moving players slowing and relentlessly into a neat little nightmare. Helpful maps fade to uselessness and innocent rooms start to bleed. Add the starkly beautiful graphics and you get a gorgeously disturbed little package.





DARK AGE OF CAMELOT

This puppy came out of no-where to challenge the might of EverQuest head on. With its choice of three legendary settings (Arthurian, Norse and Celt) plus the innovative realm war PvP for end-game kicks, we have made our choice when it comes to fantasy MMORPGs.

Score: 76 **Developer:** Mythic Entertainment Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 72



51

Score: 80 **Developer:** Sony Online Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 90

PLANETSIDE

There's just something cool about massive FPS battles where every frag has an ongoing affect on the world around you. Planetside is a new breed of online action including skill progression, vehicles, commander skill branches and one heck of an ongoing war.



PRINCE OF PERSIA

The Prince has money, royal advisors and good looks, but his style is straight out of the beggar scenes of the Thief of Bagdad. How can a man who can see the future, and turn back time, have a look that's out of date? Fab Five, you're his only hope...



A Species

HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC 3

Grab your swords and sorcery, build your armies and fight back the chaos threatening to engulf Erathia after the death of King Gryphonheart. This is the best of a mighty turn-based series ... although it's a close call because they're all pretty magic.

Score: 94 Developer: New World Computing Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 35

49

Score: 92 Developer: Bethesda Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 76

MORROWIND

This is a complex and massive RPG which ditches the boring isometric view and goes for lavish 3D, but where Morrowind really shines is in the massive world full of adventure which lets players choose where they want to get sucked in. Gorgeous.



48



MOH: ALLIED ASSAULT

This game earns its place on this list for taking all of the cool parts of Saving Private Ryan and converting it into unbelievably slick gameplay. MoH uses brilliantly staged scenes, great characters and historical details to take you into the heart of the action.

Score: 90 Developer: 2015 Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 70

47

Score: 89
Developer:
Headgate
Released: 2003
Reviewed: PCPP 94

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 2004

Sometimes a game transcends the sport it's based on. This is one of those games. From the number of courses available, to the funky True Swing system, subtle humour and even the customisation available, Tiger Woods 2004 is



46



HIDDEN & DANGEROUS 2

H&D 2 gives players the chance to carefully choose their SAS squad from 30 detailed characters and then take it behind enemy lines for some deeply sneaky and tactical action. If you do it right, those Nazis won't know what hit them.

Score: 82
Developer:
Illusion Softworks
Released: 2003
Reviewed: PCPP 95

45

Score: 88
Developer:
Big Huge Games
Released: 2003
Reviewed: PCPP 89

RISE OF NATIONS

This game is Civilization distilled to its essence and poured into RTS form. The real accomplishment is that it manages to make a flowing tech tree from Stone Age to Information Age and keeps the action pumping the whole time. Cohesive and elegant.



44



MASTER OF ORION 2

It took Master of Orion 3 to really make us appreciate this little gem. As far as turn-based space strategy games this is still the master after all of these years. Towering tech trees, custom ships, massive scale ... by Loknar's hammer it's great.

Score: 92 Developer: Simtex Released: 1996 Reviewed: PCPP 10

43

Score: 90 Developer: Monolith Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 92

TRON 2.0

This game looks amazing, with its neon-drenched lines and glowing character design, and the light cycle sequences and disc combat will send a thrill through anyone around during the 80s. With a solid storyline and shiny polish, Tron 2.0 is a digital joy.



42



KOHAN: IMMORTAL SOVEREIGNS

Kohan cunningly blends the sweeping feel of unit building from turn-based games and the spirit of something real-time. Sprawling tech trees, large-scale battles, deliberate pace and a cutting back on the usual RTS click-fest all make Kohan well list-worthy.

Score: 82 Developer: TimeGate Studios Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 71

41

Score: 93 Developer: Maxis Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 83

SIM CITY 4

Running a city is a tough but rewarding gig, and in SimCity it's also a lot of fun. Forget storyline, this is all about building something and watching it thrive. You'll even see kids running for school buses and zombies creeping graveyards. Best model set ... ever.





FREESPACE 2

When it comes to personal ship-to-ship battles in space, this game still soars above the others. Colourful night skies, capital ships trading blows, screenfuls of fighters, a dark little plot-line and you in the middle of it all. Sounds fun, doesn't it?

Score: 95 Developer: Volition Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 44

TRON 2.0

40

38

When "Server-Side
Network Architecture"
wasn't their multiplayer
code but their actual
choice of architectural
style, instead of say,
Gothic or Art Deco,
I could see it was an
emergency.
After pressing their
faces into the neon sign
above the pool hall for
about half an hour they
started to see the light.



SACRIFICE

Imagine a really cool real-time strategy game. Easy enough. Now imagine the army-commanding wizard is your character in a first-person shooter. Finally, set it all in a fairy-tale that's just dropped acid. Beautiful, polished and odd, Sacrifice is a wonder.





GEOFF CRAMMOND'S GRAND PRIX 4

Geoff Crammond's games are a pure joy for hardcore racing fans willing to follow a racing line for hours on end and tweak airfoils to cut a fraction of a second. A brutally honest sim with all the trimmings ... except a career mode.

Score: 91 Developer: Atari Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 77



Score: 93 Developer: BioWare Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 53

BALDUR'S GATE 2

For many years D&D computer games sucked harder than a starving mind flayer. Then came the Baldur's Gate series with its lovingly pre-rendered backdrops, slick adaptation of the rules, massive plot and party members who would feud or fall in love. Magic +3.





TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON

When it comes to creeping through the grass, carefully waiting for the guards to leave an opening and generally re-creating the feel of being on life and death recon nothing does it with the patient realism of Ghost Recon.

Score: 92 Developer: BioWare Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 53 36

Score: 91 Developer: Rage Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 61

HOSTILE WATERS: ANTAEUS RISING

Hostile Waters combines first-person vehicle action and RTS strategy and then gets Star Blazers on your arse with a super-carrier as your base. This game never got the respect it deserved featuring fresh gameplay, an awesome script and brilliant missions.



35



TOTAL ANNIHILATION

This oldie but goodie has slipped back into our top 100 because it is still one of the most complete RTS games you'll find. You have terrain and elevation, air, land and sea unit, scavengers, leaders, varied missions, deformable cover, not to mention impeccable balance.

Score: 98 Developer: Cavedog Released: 1997 Reviewed: PCPP 18 34

Score: 96
Developer:
Bioware
Released: 2002
Reviewed: PCPP 77

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

Neverwinter is a fine RPG with plenty of critters, spells, loot and dungeons to crawl. All that is great, but it's the amazing array of DM tools that let you craft adventures of your own, and run them pen-and-paper style that really make this magic.



33 SACRIFICE

You know what I found: the rigours of taking souls really dried my skin too. What you want is a good exfoliant and moisturiser. Put it on in the morning and the Sylph's will notice the difference right away.



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

Our favourite prince is back and his fluid moves and grace would make a cat blush. This is a thumpingly fast adventure and even if you blunder into traps or evil doers then you can literally turn back time to have another crack.

Score: 91 Developer: Ubi Soft Montreal Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 95



Score: 89 Developer: CCP Released: 2003

Reviewed: PCPP 98

EVE ONLINE

Two decades ago a little game named Elite made some big promises. This MMOG starts to make them a reality. Here combat is a strategic highlight to stellar trading and exploration, not the other way around. Privateer, Freelancer, step aside, EVE is here.





GRAND PRIX

Now, a lot of people find Grand Prix Legends hard to get into. Well, who wouldn't with that 50's helmet hair? What you want to do, is

use plenty of product.
Just pile it on and blowdry, soon you will have hair so hard that you don't need a helmet. Do a couple of laps and stepright out of the car ready for loving. Tell the ladies that Larry sent you.



30

NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2

This is a shooter with more personality than Mike Myers off his medication. It takes standout FPS action, clever level design and sparkling graphics and then shoots it all full of camp 60s humour and funkadelia. The only spy game where orange is a primary colour.

Score: 93 Developer: Monolith Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 81

29

Score: 86 Developer: Black Isle Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 32

FALLOUT 2

This game combined unrelenting dry humour, adult themes, weapons-grade RPG mechanics and a branching story that let you win the day with wit or weaponry or anything in between. You'd have to be a supermutant not to dig this.



28



QUAKE 3: ARENA

id distilled the FPS arena experience to 100 proof, called it Quake 3 and then bottled it. There are no frilly edges or wasted effects here; everything has a place and everything is built for slick fast-twitch action. Still lighting up servers across the land

Score: 93 Developer: id Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 45

27

Score: 92 Developer: 1C Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 69

IL-2 STURMOVIK

I'll let you in on a little secret: a game focusing on Russian WWII planes is our highest-ranked flight sim. With great physics, wind-snapping feel, compelling missions and sterling online play Sturmovik soars above the rest.



26



THE SIMS

Even if we put aside the endless best-selling expansions, and mind boggling popularity of this game, the Sims is still an amazing accomplishment in game design. It takes the everyday and makes it seven times more fun to play than it is to actually do. Bravo.

Score: 90 Developer: Maxis Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 47

25

Score: 89 Developer: Blizzard North Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 53

DIABLO 2

This game makes ploughing through endless hordes of beasties more addictive that it has any right to be. Several kingdoms' worth of items, a frenzied pace and lovingly-tuned gameplay means that Diablo once again hacks its way onto our list.



2/4



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004

It might not revolutionise the genre but UT2004 offers up some of the best deathmatch action to be found anywhere. It's packed with 10 game modes, vehicles, unheard of voice support, the smartest bots in the biz and fantastic explosions. A direct hit.

Score: 90 Developer: Epic Released: 2004 Reviewed: PCPP 96

23

Score: 95 Developer: Papyrus Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 30

GRAND PRIX LEGENDS

Since Grand Prix racing sims aren't tough enough already, GPL adds to the fun by going back to the days when cars had amazing amounts of grunt and astoundingly narrow tyres. It's got jaunty jalopy charm, authentic handling and the top racing spot in our 100.



22



HALO

Sure it's a sloppy port that underperforms compared to the Xbox original, but a few dropped frames cannot dilute the devilish AI, sweeping narrative and purpose-built combat environments. And, of course, there are the new multiplayer modes. PC Master Chief, we salute you

Score: 80 Developer: Bungie Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 93

21

Developer: Blizzard Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 77

WARCRAFT III

WarCraft III just oozes charm, from the masterful cut-scenes, to the easy humour and the effortless way it rolls RPG questing and hero levels into its tried and true RTS core. With kick-arse multiplayer and gorgeous colour this game almost cracks our top 20.





KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

KotOR whisks you into the Star Wars universe and offers you the temptations of the darkside. With RPG gameplay refined from Neverwinter Nights and writing that puts the preguels to shame this game is more entertaining than Jar-Jar in a Developer: BioWare Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 95

FAR CRY

Me like to blow things up as much as next guy, but plot make less sense than Jessica Simpson.

Score: 90 Developer: Crytek Released: 2004 Reviewed: PCPP 99

FAR CRY

You have one guy in an incredibly loud Hawaiian T-shirt. They have an army and lots of mutants. When these elements come together you get a good dose of ridiculously over-the-top Hollywood-style action. Far Cry is a shooter's shooter, through and through.



19

20





SYSTEM SHOCK 2

In many ways this game is the spiritual ancestor of Deus Ex, combing action, adventure and RPG elements, setting it in a cyber-punk world and giving players several ways to approach every drama. It's all that, and amazingly creepy to boot. Brilliant.

Score: 98 Developer: Looking Glass Released: 1999 Reviewed: PCPP 42 18



And you probably want

to do something about

Hawaiian shirt unless

Score: 92 Developer: Blizzard Released: 1998 Reviewed: PCPP 25

STARCRAFT

All your gamers are belonging to me! Blizzard's finely tuned sci-fi RTS soon became an online phenomenon and has never looked back. With Brood Wars adding further depth and a kick-arse story-line we have a game that still packs 'em in.



17



BATTLEFIELD VIETNAM

This game takes the awesomeness of Battlefield 1942's and transplants it 30 years forward and into steamy jungles. Vietnam, not being WWII, makes a really nice change, as does the ability to play loud music as you buzz people in attack choppers.

Score: 87 Developer: DICE Released: 2004 Reviewed: PCPP 99

16

you want to look like you were dressed by another Simpson ... Bart. At the moment I'm thanking my lucky stars you're in the jungle so much, something that hideous need 400 tons of foliage

to divert attention.

Score: 95 Developer: Looking Glass Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 49

THIEF II: THE METAL AGE

Creeping through scant shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to strike, unravelling fiendish mission objectives, and doing your best cat burglar routine in a gothic nightmare all makes for a game that is challenging, magical and bow



15



BATTLE REALMS

Battle Realms is another one of those games that just stand out in a crowd. It's intelligent, the AI is demanding and there is a raft of little touches that just make the game world spring to life. Beyond that, everyone loves a game with Samurai.

Score: 91 Developer: Liquid Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 69 14

Score: 91 Developer: Counter Strike Team Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 55

COUNTER-STRIKE

While the graphics are starting to look a little dated and the servers can be filled by dweebs jumping on the bandwagon, no online action game can even come close to the popularity of this beast. Tense close-combat and engaging team objectives keep this game on the boil.



13 **IL-2 STURMOVIK**



AGE OF MYTHOLOGY

Firing up an Age of Empires game it's hard not to be sucked into the quality, polish and meticulous class of the RTS experience. This latest game has all of that silky smoothness plus mythical adventures, Herculean heroes and angry, angry gods. Divine

Score: 93 Developer: **Ensemble Studios** Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 82

This game was originally called IL-2 Smirnoff. Going to be Russian drinking sim. Me called to help test. Don't remember rest of evening but woke up with witch's hat and lead designer's shoe. Next me hear game about aeroplanes.



HALF-LIFE

When FPS gaming started sleeping in late and couldn't be bothered going to work it was Half-Life that came along and kicked its arse. This game re-invigorated shooter AI, showed that story-lines could sell and just generally rocked harder than a KISS Reunion tour.







PLANESCAPE TORMENT

Frankly, if I had your fashion sense I'd want to remain nameless too. If Conan has taken it off his heaving body and thrown it in the bin, you should probably leave it there.

What can change the nature of a man? Hello, I'll take you to this great little tailor in the Clerk's Ward and I'll totally show you.



10



GRAND THEFT AUTO 3

We all know that being naughty can be fun, but GTA3 pushes that notion to the limit at gunpoint. Sure there is all of the open ended-adventure, the car driving that would make it as a stand-alone arcade game as well as that gritty Majioso/ gangster je ne sais pas, but it's the pure escapism of being mindlessly criminal is Score: 89 Developer: Rockstar Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 76

9

Score: 94 Developer: Bohemia Interactive Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 64

OPERATION FLASHPOINT

With huge maps, an elaborate planning phase, access to a huge variety of vehicles, one shot kills, weapons that work at decent ranges and chaotic fire fights. Operation Flashpoint does not so much have levels but war-fields. Whether in single or multi-player mode you'll find Operation Flashpoint brings multi-role modern warfare to life like no other.



8



DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR

Invisible War takes us back into a world of labyrinthine plots and visceral cyberchic. Ion Storm has gone all out in creating a complicated, and sometimes even bewildering, back-story that lures characters from one choice to the next. Be careful what you choose, because in Deus Ex choices come back to haunt you. Atmospheric and reactive haute couture gaming.

Score: 96 Developer: Ion Storm Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 97

Score: 96 Developer: Black Isle Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 46

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

I made the mistake of playing this game while I waited for Neverwinter Nights. Once again I got lured into the masterful writing, the ocean-deep background and the out-of-this-world character of the game. When Neverwinter came around, it rocked but having played Planescape just before was ... well, torment. When it comes to fantasy gaming this is in a world of its own.





CIVILIZATION 3

Plain and simple, this is the king of turn-based gaming. After the purity of design of the previous Civilization games we wondered what a new outing could possibly add. Well, it turned out that the answer was more depth, more personality and the ability to use culture as a weapon so you can crush ideologies not just soldiers, Civtastic.

Score: 95 Developer: **Firaxis** Released: 2001 Reviewed: PCPP 68

Score: 95 Developer: Rockstar Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 89

GTA VICE CITY

Grand Theft Auto 3 is a great starting point for a game, but it isn't the engine or gameplay that rockets Vice City to number 5 with a bullet ... it's all about the 80s. From its soundtrack (the best compilation ever) to the Miami Vice action sequences, this game hits all of the right notes and wears all the right T-shirts and suit jackets.



CALL OF DUTY

This was originally named: Call of Judy. It was going to be actionoriented game that let you relive Judy Garland's most exciting times on film sets like the Wizard of Oz and then on into some drugfuelled hallucinations from her later days. While we just love Judy, it just wasn't working for our straight guys



DEUS EX

Normally we don't like to have more than one game in a series on our list, but for BF. GTA and Deus Ex we made major exceptions. While Invisible War is prettier. you can't pass up the plot, innovation and sheer scope of the original. With the longer story comes more branches, more options and more ways to warp the world around you. Deus Ex still owns us.

Score: 98 Developer: Ion Storm Released: 2000 Reviewed: PCPP 51

Score: 92 Developer: Creative Assembly Released: 2002 Reviewed: 78

MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR

Shogun: Total War blended turn-based nation building with RTS battles on an imperial scale. With the Medieval edition Creative Assembly has taken the Total War concept and made it more accessible, grandiose and fun to play. This game is everything a strategy title should be: sweeping in scale, intelligent in execution and thunderous in action.







BATTLEFIELD 1942

Although there is a single player mode, it's multiplayer where this soldier comes into its own. Whether you are tail gunning in B17 flown by your friends Memphis Bell-style, running on the ground like a Band of Brothers or parachuting into a tactical position ... when it comes a full toy box and tight-team play BF1942 is in a league of its own.

Score: 97 Developer: Digital Illusions Released: 2002 Reviewed: PCPP 80

CALL OF DUTY

If you guessed that a WWII shooter was going to come out number one ... well, let's face it: the law of averages was on your side. Then again, with so many of the things out there, Call of Duty taking top spot is something of an accomplishment, because it's not like it distinguished itself with a wildly innovative choice of setting.

Oh no, it lets the 24 singleplayer missions, each one more heart-pounding and engaging than the last, do that. These missions span three armies (the American, British and Russian) and they don't even bother trying to tie them together with one character. No, sir-ee bob. It's all about the action.

It's all about being in the middle of a war and watching anything from a platoon to an army of allies flow intelligently around you and charge into hordes of the enemy while you have to fight tooth and nail to survive. It's all about having to make the most of cover, suppression fire and your choice of weapons all the while watching for things like sneaky enemy flanking manoeuvres.

It's not all army on army, scale. There are also commando runs on tight bunkers and amazing sequences like the high-speed chase where you're manning a mounted gun on a truck as it slams through close shave after narrow escape thanks to the likes of tanks and roadblocks. To round out your scenic tour of the war, you'll even get to visit Stalingrad, Enemy at the Gates-style.

While some of the missions, like the truck rally, are pretty tightly scripted most of your combat encounters give you plenty of room to try your own solutions. In short you won't be forgetting these missions anytime soon.

In case the all-thriller, nofiller 10-hour single player missions aren't enough for you then Call of Duty also comes with a very handy multiplayer component, with a cool new feature: when you die you get to see five seconds from the point of view of the guy who nailed Score: 94 Developer: Infinity Ward Released: 2003 Reviewed: PCPP 94



you. It's great for locating camping snipers, not to mention spotting people doing dodgy things. This game is no BF1942, but the multiplayer is a solid addition to an already fine game. Beyond that, the choice of weapons is good, they all feel like they can cause some trouble, the sound effects are suitably meaty

Beyond that, the choice of weapons is good, they all feel like they can cause some trouble, the sound effects are suitably meaty and you have the added ability to increase accuracy by sighting down the iron sights of your gun, which comes in very handy in the later missions.

So, while it might not blaze new trails, or go down in the history of fine art, Call of Duty takes our number one spot because, right now, no other game delivers like this one. It promises action and delivers with a ride that is thrill-packed, fun and memorable from the moment you strap yourself in, until the credits roll.





CALL OF DUTY

While Denton took the designers out to show them the error of plastic pocket protectors, we snuck in and completely redecorated with a classic WWII theme but with a touch of Indiana Jones to make it zing. Boy, you should have seen the relief on their faces!



GAMES IN REVIEW

erusing the PC games weekly sales chart, I typically find myself despairing at what you decide to buy. Well, perhaps not you specifically, but I'm certain you know who I mean. Every week the same games from the same names clog up the upper reaches of the Top 10 - the same Sims add-ons and the same mega franchises.

It is especially sad when you consider there are increasingly more games released through smalltime publishers who have no distribution foothold in this country. Of course, the quality of these games varies enormously, though often the only aspect betraying a limited budget is the lack of the kind of slick production values you'd expect from a Microsoft release. Yet, in our view, such "alternative" games are just as worthy of your attention as the latest Activision blockbuster. As such we are now more determined than ever to seek out these potential gems (see Geneforge 2 this issue, for example). If you've discovered an obscure diamond in the rough, then drop me an email and we'll endeavour to have it reviewed.

As our game of the month illustrates, gaming goodness can just as readily be found away from the big name studios and cashed up publishers. Painkiller is not a big budget title. And that's perhaps why it has succeeded.

It is difficult to imagine the likes of Electronic Arts, for instance, commissioning an FPS on PC that so totally fails to conform to the dominant meme. Collecting coins? Arbitrary secondary objectives? Replaying levels to unlock bonuses?



Tarot cards as power-ups? Is this some kind of console kiddie game?

We can be thankful that developer People Can Fly was able to design its game in an environment relatively free of overbearing publisher demands. PC gaming doesn't necessarily need more games like Painkiller, but it is crying out for more titles developed with the same kind of creative daring. Let's hope it makes its mark on those sales charts.

> **David Wildgoose** Editor

- 69 Painkiller
- 72 Manhunt
- 74 Hitman: Contracts
- 76 Final Fantasy XI
- 78 Battle Mages
- 79 Lords of the Realm III
- 80 Sacred

- 81 Dead Man's Hand
- 82 IL-2 Ace Expansion
- 83 Gangland
- 84 Kasparov's Chessmate
- 85 CSI: Dark Motives
- 86 Highway to the Reich
- 87 Geneforge 2

GOLD AWARD

HIGH DISTINCTION



The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one, It is gaming. You must own it.



This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.

DISTINCTION



An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost but not quite an essential purchase. An intriguing new concept

CREDIT



Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.

PASS



A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial. A game that receives a

FAIL



There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen. There are more than 5000



Developer: People Can Fly ■ Publisher: Dreamcatcher ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

he first-person shooter genre has been in danger lately of getting lost up its own arse hole. You only need look to the number of pretentious, drab and predictable World War II shooters clogging up the shelves to see how it's fallen into one hell of a rut. Despite there being one or two shining lights on the horizon (Half-Life 2 and S.T.A.L.K.E.R immediately come to mind), it seems that developers have been so caught up in the pursuit of realism that they've forgotten what attracted gamers to this genre in the first place. Games such as Doom and Quake were wildly surreal, and the appeal was all about being thrust into some nightmarish situation with only a shotgun to get you through.

Well, if you've been missing those imaginative environments, unconventional weapons, ugly-as-hell monsters, and exciting level design that doesn't rely on highly-scripted jack-in-the-box scenarios, then you'll find that Painkiller is a timely reminder of just how creepy and fun a fast-paced FPS can be.

Goth-tastic

Some gamers may choose to pigeon-hole Painkiller as an "old-school" FPS, but that label would be unfair to this surprisingly slick and clever shooter from People Can Fly. This isn't a rehash of tired old FPS ideas or another Doom-parody such as the shenanigans of Serious Sam, but a recapturing of what made early shooters such white-knuckled fun. This is all about desperate survival against the odds, with a few added twists to give Painkiller a style all its own.

Initially, however, Painkiller isn't very impressive. The first level has you bouncing between small cramped - and

Civilization III for this?" But slowly, each following level manages to up the ante until you realise you're having an absolute ball... It was all clever pacing after all. The game proceeds to get bigger, better and really quite audacious - you're never likely to see boss monsters quite this big ever again!

The first weapon you get to grips with is the shotgun - probably the most loved item of any FPS gamer's inventory - and

Painkiller is a timely reminder of just how creepy and fun a fast-paced FPS can be

box like - sections of a grim cemetery, mowing down hordes of onrushing skeletal warriors. You'll have a small amount of fun seeing what parts of the environment you can blast apart with your shotgun, but on the whole it's a rather worrisome start.

The game doesn't really start with a bang, but more "hmm, I've seen this kind of thing too many times before... did I really uninstall



SYSTEM

NEED

PIV 2.4GHz 512MB RAM 128MB DirectX9 video card

WANT

PIII 1.5GHz 384MB RAM 64MB video card with hardware transform & lighting support

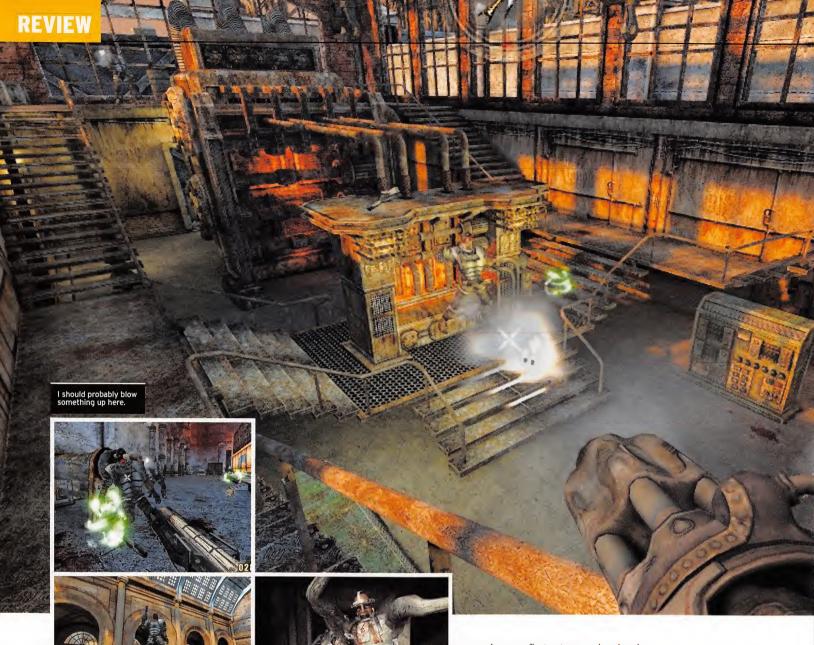
MULTIPLAYER

162

ONLINE

www.thepainkillers

Some lame metal band. Write them some "fan mail"!



boy, is this one a good one. It's feels meaty, the blast radius is satisfyingly brutal, and it has an inventive and handy secondary function. With a simple rightclick, your shotgun fires an icy blast that will freeze whatever is in your way so you can shatter it into tiny pieces with another plain vanilla shell. It's simple, but highly effective in the face of agitated demons keen to close in and claw at your pretty boy good looks. This shotgun is one of only five weapons in the entire game. But believe us when we say that five weapons - each with a secondary function - is all you'll ever need in Painkiller. This is because none of the weapons are useless filler thrown in the game to use up the 6-9 key bindings. For instance, the rocketlauncher doubles as a chaingun. This is streamlined game design, and it works.

The coolest weapon in the game, however, is the stake gun. Imagine what Buffy could have achieved with this baby! With a slow re-fire rate - similar to Quake 2's railgun - your aim with the stake gun is absolutely crucial. It's made even more fun by the rag-doll physics of the enemies (and the Havok 2.0 engine) and

the way that the stakes tend to pin the bad guys against the environment. Fire at a zombie's leg, and it'll be skewered into the pavement; fire one into the shoulder and it'll likely get crucified against the wall. This is visceral stuff. The satisfaction of a well-timed, well-aimed snapshot with the stake gun cannot be overstated. Its secondary function is a whole 'nother weapon entirely - a grenade launcher. You can lob a grenade, then aim up and shoot a stake at it, pinning the explosive to your opponent.

There's probably no need to go into any more detail on the other weapons, as they'll be fun for you to discover on your own when you first get your grimy hands on them in-game. I think our point has been made. The weapons rock.

Coins and cards

One of the reasons why Painkiller is such good unwholesome fun is that People Can Fly have been willing to allow it to be a "game" as opposed to feeling as if they need maintain some kind of illusion of reality. This is evident by the inclusion of the tarot card system. Each map in the game has a secret objective that is secondary to your priority of surviving to the end of the level. It may require you to kill every single monster, collect all the gold coins that spill forth from coffins, pots and boxes or make it through the level by using only one weapon. If you succeed in doing whatever is required, it unlocks a tarot card that can be 'bought' (yes, by those shiny gold coins) and then mapped to a hot-key for you to activate during future levels. Different











The pain killed him.





DEATHMATCH

Painkiller's multiplayer options are refreshingly traditional. The freefor-all deathmatch will come naturally to any Quake veterans still browsing for servers, as the frantic, high-paced, weapon-switching gibfest is as classic as it gets - the physics even allowing for Quake 2 style bunny-hopping to make you feel even more at home. It may not set the world on fire, but this is solid and reliable multiplayer gaming that will no doubt attract its own hardcore crowd. A few more maps would be nice, but jump right in, the water's fine.

cards hold varying powers, such as Haste (which slows the world around you) or Endurance (which halves the damage you take). It's a very arcade-like element to integrate into a first person game, but it works a treat, and you'll find you have a finger hovering nervously above the tarot key whenever you find yourself in a tough spot (you can only use them once per level). It adds another dimension to the shooter action on offer and will probably encourage many players to replay levels over in order to crack the

IF ONLY IT CAME WITH EARPLUGS

Probably the single worst thing about Painkiller is the music. Why some developers think we need to hear generic metal music grinding along repetitively in the background in order to enjoy our gameplay is an absolute mystery. It doesn't make the game appear any more "hardcore", it just annoys the crap out of us! Whatever happened to establishing mood? As for the rest of the game's sound, well, other than some freaky demonic gurgling, it's all pretty unmemorable.

secondary objective and uncover new cards - which certainly adds to Painkiller's replayability, and also its challenge.

The other two crucial components of a good shooter - level design and creature AI - both have their highs and lows in Painkiller, but thankfully the highs outnumber the lows. Some levels are notably better than others - the eerie atmosphere of the Asylum level with its straitjacket-bound zombies and haunted house vibe, is streets ahead of the tedious Snowy Bridge, for instance, where you're pitted against seemingly endless jumping ninjas. But Painkiller never fails to be challenging, and most shooter veterans will get a good run for their money.

Heavenly Hell

It's a bit of a shame then that the story line in Painkiller is as flimsy as it is. But then, how in heaven's name do you justify hordes of hellish creatures swarming the player on every level? This is just another one of those games where the highly surreal gameplay simply can't be matched with a plausible storyline.

Even so, People Can Fly have done their damnedest to give you a motive for your undying lust for blowing zombies' heads off. Points for trying.

It goes like this: After a nasty car crash (caused by a bit of hanky panky in the front seat with your girly whilst driving), you find yourself in some kind of limbo world that mirrors reality - up to a point. It's an odd place caught between Heaven and Hell, and it's here where you're tasked with hunting down demon spawn in order to win yourself a place in Heaven. Of course, you're not given a clear reason for why you need to redeem your soul and justify your place up in the fluffy white clouds, so you just get on with the job and hope that things become a little easier to understand later on. It's you versus the armies of Lucifer. buddy, so here's a tip: Less thinking, more shooting.

So when was the last time a FPS had you spinning on the spot, desperate to get your back up against a wall? Painkiller manages to incite this kind of feverish gameplay, and you're never battling with the game mechanics instead of the game's demons. Finally, another shooter where your mouse hand will start to get the sweats.

Eliot Fish





FOR

Distilled FPS goodness with a few cool tricks

AGAINST

Bad music

OVERALL

Meaty, nasty, tricky, spooky... and just plain fun!

87



Developer: Rockstar North ■ Publisher: Rockstar ■ Distributor: Take 2 ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1GHz CPII 192MB RAM 32MB videocard 2.3GB HDD

WANT

256MB RAM 64MB videocard

MULTIPLAYER

ONLINE

See the crazy Plastic Bag Lady weave rugs, place mats, even chickens, from a colourful assortment of plastic bags.

ow patient are you? The latest controversy-baiting release from self-styled "edgy" developer and publisher Rockstar is a game of brutal cat and mouse. Far from the open spaces of Liberty and Vice cities, miles from the freeform playgrounds of the Grand Theft Auto series, Manhunt instead offers a taut, streamlined stealth experience. Not to mention disturbing, sickening and really quite good.

If games are meant to be fun, then it appears as if Rockstar North (the studio

formerly known as DMA Design and previously responsible for Lemmings, of all things) has done an appalling job here. For Manhunt, on the surface at least, seems almost impossible to enjoy; it's unflinchingly amoral (not immoral - a crucial distinction) approach to gruesome physical violence is initially repellent.

Your first task is to creep up behind an unsuspecting figure and wrap a plastic bag around his head, holding it tight until his body falls limp and topples with a meaty thud onto the grimy sidewalk.

When sneaking you cannot be heard and when close enough to an enemy you are able to trigger an execution by holding down the action button. Thus set in motion, the viewpoint switches to a closeup overlaid with grainy interference and you get to watch the killing - whether it's suffocation with a plastic bag, a shard of glass to sever the jugular vein or a crowbar to gouge out the abdomen - in shockingly graphic detail.

Hold down that action button longer and you are "rewarded" with even more detail: more blood hits the camera lens, more bones are snapped, more wounds are stabbed, more cries are heard from the unfortunate victim, more limbs are removed...

Once you've slashed through the violent surface. Manhunt is a very pure gaming experience





White knuckled

I horrified myself during the first few locations by holding down the action button throughout each cut-scene of execution, long after the game required me to keep the button depressed. Compelled by instinct, I didn't want to let go until the despicable job was complete. The clip is showing my victim slumped to his knees, reeling and dazed, baseball bat poised to strike the poor sap's head... He's done for, a fraction of a second from decapitation, and here I am still doggedly holding down the button, my knuckle













SHOWN NO MERCY

You will ask yourself, why am I doing this? It feels wrong and demeaning, wretched and dirty. So why? Because it's a game and killing is what the game is about. There's nothing else to do, so you kill to keep playing. Manhunt knows the player has no control in a game - you're powerless, at the mercy of the designer. Manhunt knows you'll do whatever the game tells you to do, so it wants to push you to the very extreme by almost gleefully instructing you to kill. And kill you do, not for your own pleasure but for the game's pleasure.

There is a small set of rules to learn, master and then exploit. For example, you are completely invisible in a shadow zone, even with a thug almost pressed up against your face.

The set up is simple. Each area is essentially a film set, populated by thugs hired by the director for the sole purpose of hunting you down. Levels are designed as mazes. There are obvious shadows in which to hide. There are always enemies trudging elaborate patrol routes. There are weapons and items lying just where you'll need them. There are health pick-ups in tricky to reach dead-ends. Doors to the next level don't open until you've completed Starkweather's next arbitrary task.

Desperate measures

Manhunt succeeds as a game because its design remains focused and allows the most important ingredients of a gripping stealth adventure to come together. Rockstar recognises that key to any stealth experience is the thrill of being where you're not supposed to be. And there's surely nowhere more illicit than the elaborate set of a snuff movie. It also appreciates the delicate interplay forged between the tension of not being spotted and the release of eliminating an unaware enemy. The violence serves only to heighten the tension, elevating this game of cat and mouse to one of sheer desperation.

However, there are a handful of

glitches. The stealth dynamic is less interesting once projectile weapons are introduced mid-way through the game firing a shotgun is an especially indiscreet mode of attack. Also, multi-use weapons such as the crowbar and baseball bat detract from the tension of having to constantly replace disposable plastic bags and glass shards.

And then there are the crane sequences... Oh dear. On several occasions vou're forced to commandeer a crane and pick up and drop objects (e.g. fridges) on respawning enemies who are of course shooting you. Quite why Rockstar deemed these absurd interludes a) appropriate and relevant to the rest of the game and b) even the slightest bit entertaining remains something of a mystery. My advice is to leg it from the crane as soon as possible to avoid the frustrations of a most baffling design decision.

For the most part, Manhunt is utterly captivating. You slowly build a rhythm to your movements - stop, survey, sneak... subdue - that soon becomes second nature. These exemplary stealth stylings, injected with an urgency carried by the kill-or-be-killed setting, produce a title of enormous playability and dark polish. Don't be fooled by the over-the-top violence though - this isn't an action game. If you're wondering if it's the game for you, just ask yourself: how patient are you?

David Wildgoose



implicit sign of encouragement for my unsavoury alter ego.

Context is everything here. You play James Earl Cash, convicted murdered awaiting execution on death row. You are guilty, of that there is no doubt, yet you're handed a reprieve (of sorts) by a mysterious benefactor called Starkweather. The director of snuff films, Starkweather wants you to be the new star of his company Valiant Videos' next range of fetish releases.

Yet the context isn't that of a vile, seedy criminal underworld, but rather of a videogame itself. Once you've slashed through the violent surface, Manhunt reveals itself to be a very pure kind of gaming experience. In contrast to the pseudo-realism of Splinter Cell, Rockstar has instead focused on providing a very gamey atmosphere. There's no pretence to realism, authenticity or plausibility; things only exist in the game world to strengthen those core play mechanics.

RATING



FOR Stealthy **Polished** Clever

AGAINST

Some design elements seem at odds with the rest

OVERALL

A smartly executed stealth title, if you'll excuse the pun





Developer: IO ■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

256MB RAM 64MB Video card 1GB HDD

WANT

P4-3GHz **1GB RAM** Radeon 9700 1GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

ONLINE

Professional Rull Riders, Because I did a google search for a fan site for Luc Besson's awesome hitman-flavoured film The Professional and this is all I found.

t was while I was dressed as an opium waiter on my way to brutally murder an obese meat-packing king with a cleaver while I had the severed arm of a ritualistically slaughtered girl down my shirt that I realised Hitman: Contracts is not what you'd call a "nice" game.

Consider also, that as I strode purposefully through the chilly halls of the slaughterhouse, a masque was in process, and the guests were really into shagging each other up against walls from which dangled dead horses, while in other rooms BDSM-themed babes gave explicit, crotch-nuzzling lap dances to bloated, besuited dudes with badness on their minds and pistols in their pockets.

And all this on the second mission.



Change ain't good Leon

Once again, Hitman: Contracts follows the adventures of our favourite bald bringer of death, known only as 47. Genetically engineered to be the perfect assassin, 47 came out of the vat a little faulty - he's developed a conscience somewhere along the trail of blood, and now we find him gutshot, collapsed on his apartment floor, gripped by the shakes and hallucinating a series of protracted flashbacks over his recent career. These flashbacks form the bulk of the missions in the game.

And so off we go, sneaking and slaughtering our way through mission after mission, each with lovingly crafted scenery and fairly cerebral paths of

HOW SMART?

So, a puzzle game. Do you need to be Sherlock Holmes to be able to figure it out? Not really - the game provides hints. And in any case, the things to do are usually pretty obvious. If an object appears, you need to use it. Of course, there are alternate ways to achieve objectives, but oddly enough they often seem much easier than what is obviously the 'designed' solution, and usually involve simply looking for a back door.

approach. Shooter fans be warned -Hitman: Contracts is just like the original game. It's less of a shooter, and much more of a puzzler.

For instance, there are no health packs. You have 100% life, and that's all you get. Most missions though, you should be able to finish without being grazed by a single bullet. Let's take the Meat King's Party as an example. It's the second mission in the game and the briefing tells you pretty much explicitly what to do, so I have no qualms about spoiling it here. But still, to the spoilersensitive I say: you have been warned.

It's Romania. The Meat King is a fat Scottish bloke (yes, a shameless but much darker riff on Austin Powers' Fat Bastard) who has just managed to wiggle his way out of a legal predicament thanks to the efforts of his lawyer. He's also taken your client's daughter captive. 47's task is to kill the lawyer, kill the fat bastard, and rescue the daughter.

Milk is all I need

Step one is getting inside the abattoir where the party is being held. Walking up to the door in your natty black hitman suit will get you shot by the dozens of masked guards crawling over the place. Two options: change clothes with the butcher you've just iced in the















back of a van, or with the guest who's just popped around a stack of crates for a quiet pee. Suitably disguised, 47 must ditch his beloved Silverballer pistols, because the guards want to "feel his flesh" at the door.

Inside, a helpful icon on the map directs 47 to a locker room where he finds an opium waiter's costume. A quick change of clothes later, and 47 is able to casually stroll into the private booth where the target lawyer is waiting to chase the dragon. Give him his pipe, and the lawyer bongs on and passes out. As luck would have it, the lawyer is carrying a Silverballer himself, silenced, so it's quick work to dispatch him. Objective one complete.



Hitman: Contracts is a puzzle game. let's not kid ourselves. It's up to you to combine various objects in certain ways at certain times, then wait by a certain door for a certain person to go past before jumping out and throttling them to death. But sometimes obvious things don't seem to work. For instance, 47 gets a chicken, whereupor the game tells him the chicken looks big enough to be stuffed. So he puts his Silverballer inside. But then, when presenting himself for a body-search. the weapon seems to be found, Bug? Not at all - see, 47 is also carrying a meat hook. Sure, when he was bodysearched outside, the meat hook wasn't detected as a weapon, but up on the second floor they're obviously a little more sensitive. A thinking game like Hitman: Contracts needs to communicate very clearly with its player. Occasionally, it mumbles.

47 strolls back toward the change room, only to run into the real opium waiter, who was under the impression he was the only one on shift that night. Bang. Drag the body out of sight, change back into the butcher's clothes, and go and hang out in the kitchen. Eventually, the chef demands 47 take a chicken up to the fat bastard's room.

Armed with a chicken, 47 mounts the stair and pokes around in the top floor of the abattoir. In a back room he finds a grotesque shrine to the client's kidnapped daughter, complete with glossy pictures with "BITCH" written on them in lipstick. A schmaltzy love song plays on an old turntable. Pine-tree shaped air fresheners dangle from the ceiling, just like in Seven. So too dangles the daughter, eyes gouged out, wrapped in a plastic sheet, blood congealing on the floor.

What about my plant?

47 snaps open his mobile phone, gets an update from the client. He's instructed to grab evidence of the murder - the girl's severed arm will do nicely. Just then, the fat bastard's not-quite-as-fat-but-twice-as-crazy brother bursts through the door





Don't mind me, you'll be dead soon.

waving a cleaver. The Silverballer makes short work of him, however. Leaving the body in the creepy shrine, 47 heads out, scampers across the rooftops with his plate of chicken, neatly bypassing the body search at the main stairway, then gains access to the fat bastard's room.

Naturally, he's naked and being serviced by prostitutes.

Delighted at being brought more chicken, for a moment the fat bastard doesn't realise there's a pistol levelled at his flabby temple. Game over for the Meat King.

As the above should indicate, this is not a game for anyone who has any sort of qualms about being intimately involved with grotesque abuse of the human form, the slaying of innocents who are in the wrong place at the wrong time and, hell, kinky sex. It's also not a game for anyone who's feeling all Hitmanned out.

First the rifle. Then the knife.

At first, it's difficult to see what's new in the game. Sure, all the missions are new and there are some new toys and the graphics engine is even more insanely detailed, physics-wise, but apart from having to buy a whole new machine to run it, how is it different from the first game?

Hitman: Contracts combines the evilcivilian focus of the first game with the military base raids of the second. The scripting is more complex, the places seem a bit more real. The interface is lean and tasty and the game is a moderate cerebral challenge. We also find out more about 47 himself, and indeed the story is probably the main reason to play it.

The game is impeccably designed, beautifully executed, and other vacuous superlatives that just mean good stuff. Take a look at it if you're still hungry for Hitman action, but don't necessarily expect it to relight your fire.

Anthony Fordham



FOR
Mission design
Interface

AGAINST

System requirements
Too familiar
Occasionally obtuse

OVERALL More of the

More of the same, but somewhat better





Developer: Square Enix ■ Publisher: Square Enix ■ Distributor: www.gamesuniverse.com.au ■ Price: \$105 + monthly fee ■ Rating: N/A ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

800MHz CPU
128 MB RAM
32MB graphics card
DX 8.1 sound card
6Gb HDD
Dial-up Internet
connection.

WANT

1.4GHz CPU 256MB RAM 64MB graphics card, 32x CD-ROM Broadband Internet connection.

MULTIPLAYER

Massively so

ONLINE

www.playonline.com

ur game opens to a glistening CGI sequence of some length, profiling the struggle of an outpost, a fantastic castle of the imagination, assaulted by monstrous beings. Two tiny children survive an invasion by grotesque, lumbering beastmen, only to find themselves cornered. The elder sister pushes her young brother over a rock wall, allowing him to escape. In doing this, she hesitates, and the beastmen close in. The little boy runs away blubbering, traumatised and alone. It's a fitting, if bittersweet introduction to one

THE FUNKY STUFF

FFXI on PC also includes the expansion, called Rise of the Zilart, and just as well - it's got lots of the good stuff, such as unlockable jobs like Samurai, Ninja and Dragoon (yes, dragon-training dude as in Panzer Dragoon Orta). When playing the Dragoon, your dragon is akin to the summoned Aeons of the series, which can also mimic your attacks and stay resident on the battlefield. The installation also includes an online card game called Tetra Master, although the subscription for that isn't bundled – you'll need to pay extra for it.

of the most anticipated massively multiplayer games of recent years.

You play one of the citizens in this world called Vana'diel, which is besieged by monsters. Hume (human), Elvaan (elf), Galka (giant) and Mithra (cat-woman) races await you within, as well as the whimsical and tiny Tarutaru, who look like wind-up dolls. You select one and thus, set out on your path to becoming a mighty adventurer, with odd jobs such as fishing, weaving and Alchemy. There are also six combat specialisations to choose from: Warrior, Thief and Monk, and three magic-using alternatives.

FFXI uses the RTB combat system from the single-player Final Fantasy titles, which is a continuous turn-based system where your decisions will affect the timing between the frequency of your strikes and the enemy's. Being partly realtime, you can change your mind about what you're going to do at any time, up until the event occurs. This is reflected in the way weapons have a visible statistic showing their recharge time. You can only target one foe at a time, however your enemies tend to propagate in tiny individual units, so rather than the "contained" battles of previous FF games there can be some quite interesting battles spread over the landscape where you and your compatriots break off attacks to choose particular targets, or focus your ire onto one foe.

On your knees

There are a few nice enhancements, such as preventing cowards from logging off to escape major conflicts: to log out, you

















must kneel on the ground for thirty seconds. Being attacked will halt the process, so no longer can weasel-y players flee offline and leave their allies for dead. When you're killed, you suffer an experience point penalty, which may cause you to lose a job level. If you're revived on the field within a time limit, you only pay a partial experience penalty.

Initially you can't kill your fellow players, but a new player versus mode called "Ballista" will be unlocked soon. In Ballista, teams of players from different countries square off, with the objective being to throw a "Petra" (stone) into a castle construct called a "Rook". You'll need to defeat an enemy to unlock the rook for access - this is after you've found a Petra, several of which are hidden in the game field. Ballista looks like it's basically a creative form of organised sport, allowing large numbers of players to participate.

Spending time with friends is tough in FFXl - you'll initially have a severe task actually finding anyone you know

IN THE HOUSE

Every player has their own space in FFXI, called their "Mog House". Inside the Mog House, you'll find your "Moogle" - a hovering albino batpiglet that looks after your spare tems. You can buy furniture and stuff it in the house, designing your own interior arrangement. Furniture bestows certain advantages, such as increasing your storage space and the life of your plants. Yes, your plants, as your Moogle will also do the gardening, tending any greenery that you've seeded in flowerpots. This virtual greenhouse can yield useful fruits, decorative flowers and sellable items. Unfortunately your Mog House only has a visible interior, accessed by a joint public doorway.

in the game. You'll be allocated a server to play on, one of many identical servers running concurrent games. It's possible to join friends on a different server, but you need to earn a game item, called a World Pass, to do it. This difficulty could turn off players who like to adventure with their friends from the outset, and explore the early options together because it's impossible until you reach a certain grade. However, once you get there, the features for group activity start to resemble other MMORPGs. One player holds an item called a Linkshell. and distributes Link Pearls allowing each member of the group to communicate with the collective at all times, over any distance.

No Final Fantasy game is complete without Chocobos, which resemble giant chickens and behave like a trusty steed. While riding, you can't be attacked and travel much more quickly. The really interesting part is using the Chocobos to dig for rare items - although they need a leafy lip-schmacko called a Gysahl green in order to convince them to do so. These quaint birds look great and serve as a strong link to the classic Final Fantasy lore.





Although FFXI adds some nice improvements to the genre, when you get down to it, the game is still built on the same kind of "levelling treadmill" structure that Everguest is famous for. Purchasing even the simplest weapon requires you to win hundreds of conflicts and you can't venture very far into the wilderness without meeting very aggressive, very fast creatures of a skill and power dwarfing your own. Who of course hunt you down and kill you mercilessly as a noob, usually with one hit.

Rabbit skirts

Considering that you lose a big chunk of experience every time you die, this dynamic will keep players hovering around the skirts of their home castle for some time, picking on the Wild Rabbits, before their game really gets interesting. Taking on quests where you travel from place to place requires quite an advanced state of experience and equipment - so everyone will need to go through this laborious early stage of the game.

The interface also needs work. It provides rather unwieldy access to what is actually a fairly small number of options with odd keys for displaying, or hiding the menu resulting in strange states where you can't click on anything. There's also a "console" type interface which is surprising, allowing many, many "emote" commands ala your old school MUDs.

Final Fantasy XI looks great, is wellpatronised and has turned out to be a great MMOG rendition of the popular PlayStation series. Absolutely recommended for fans of the genre and worth a limited evaluation if you're looking for a new online title to sink your teeth into.

Ed Dawson

RATING

FOR

Battle system Mog houses and chocobos!

AGAINST

Treadmilling Clunky interface

OVERALL

A neat addition to a crowded genre, with some real steps forward



SYSTEM

NEED

P3-733 128MB RAM GeForce2 MX 650MB HDD

WANT

P3-900 128MB RAM GeForce3 650MB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

"Warning: This Site Contains Sexual Depictions Between Men." Yes, it's adult Lord of the Rings slash tiction. Legolas on Aragorn hot tub action. In brief, avoid.

RATING



OVERALL
Proves 48 clichés
just equal one
really big cliché.

51

h sweet Gods of Clichéd Fantasy, what a tiresome pile of cack this game is. Battle Mages attempts to do what Warcraft III already did 18 months ago, and did roughly forty-three times better.

You are a recent graduate of the Imperial Sorcery School on a quest for a magical jewel which will reunite the Inner World and prevent the asdfhlsaflhj... sorry I must have dozed off on my keyboard there for a moment.

Battle Mages takes everything bad about Warcraft III and Sacrifice and combines it unerringly into one game. Warcraft III occasionally feels like a low-fat RPG wannabe, well Battle Mages feels like that even more so. Sacrifice tries a trendy FPS/RPG hybridisation that makes the viewpoint feel occasionally restricted, and Battle Mages has taken this problem and run with it to create one of the least friendly camera interfaces seen in recent years.

Poke in the eye ...

Travel around a bland 3D landscape cursing at the camera controls and fighting utterly generic enemies in the hopes of maybe stumbling across a likewise utterly generic magic item. That's Battle Mages in a nutshell.

Whereas Warcraft III cleverly deploys its RPG elements so as not to interrupt the flow of the RTS battlin' action, the Battle Mages interface manages only to get catastrophically underfoot with a selection of unwieldy stat screens.

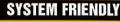
Managing spells, items, troops and your own personal statistics is anything but intuitive, and the game gives no indication of when you have received experience so it's difficult to know when you can upgrade your basic skills.

Troop management for the most part is fairly standard - click here and there to make the little tykes run around doing your evil bidding. However, it's possible to upgrade troops at certain towns, although it's not immediately apparent when you can and can't do this: it depends on how much experience the troop has at the time you want to upgrade it.

Troops are actually squads of six separate units that have a single health bar for all six individuals. However, in battle sometimes the squad of troops will lose a member, despite you casting healing spells and keeping the health bar all the way in the green. Once two squads are weak enough they can be combined into a single squad and so play continues... ad nauseum.

..with a burnt stick

The 'mage' part of the title refers to the player character, an invisible mage who commands his army via an out-of-body



Okay, so every now and again I do need to sit back and remember that not every gamer in Australia has access to a PC with a clock speed measured in GHz and a video card powerful enough to send humans to Mars. Battle Mages is indeed a system friendly game, and manages not to look too completely awful in the process. However, once again, Warcraft III caters for low-end systems much more effectively so sadly, even on this front Battle Mages is ignominiously routed.

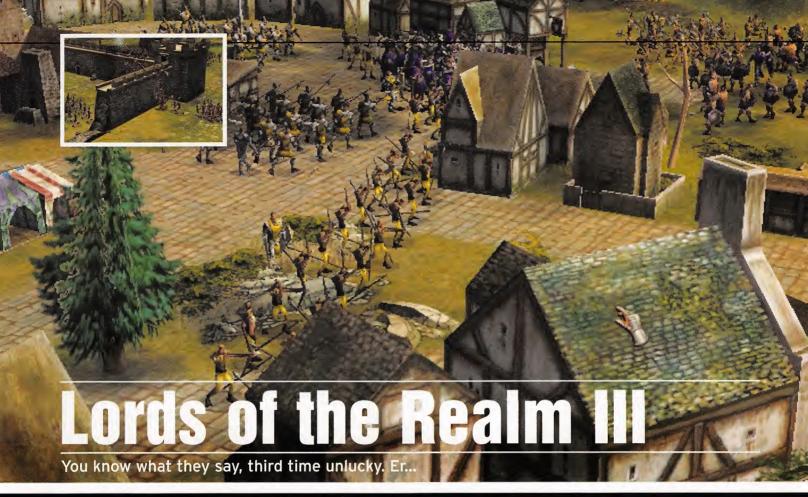
experience (go figure). There are four schools of magic - Chaos, Nature, Energy and Commander. The first three I felt I had a pretty good handle on, but I wasn't immediately certain what Commander was all about - his profile mentioned that there is more to magic than spells, and commanding troops is an important aspect of magic too. Presumably he's an especially militant character although frankly after playing several hours with Chaos, Nature and Energy I honestly couldn't be arsed wading through the same missions again with Commander.

Developer Tangem has also thoughtfully provided a 'profile view' of your mage, who appears smack bang in the middle of the screen and prevents you from seeing any of the action. Truly, one of the great pointless features in modern gaming.

Almost any fantasy game you can think of is better than Battle Mages, including but not limited to HOMM, Divine Divinity, Age of Wonders, Etherlords and of course Warcraft III. There's simply no compelling reason to buy this game.

Anthony Fordham





Developer: Impressions Games ■ Publisher: Sierra ■ Distributor: Vivendi Universal ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

ords of the Realm I and II were much loved strategy games that mixed turn-based strategic play with real-time combat, so there was a fair bit of discontented murmuring in the fan base when Impressions revealed that the third game in the series would go completely real-time. There's something to be said for keeping up with the Joneses (the Joneses in this case being the plethora of strategy games out there that have abandoned turn-based gameplay), but was this just a case of change for change's sake?

It has to be said, Lords of the Realm III has got one of the most useless tutorials ever designed. After showing you some very, very basic combat commands for ordering about your troops, the tutorial then takes you to the Strategic Map to explain the bigger picture. However, you're given such a surface level introduction, that before you know it you're firing up the campaign with absolutely no real idea of what you should be doing. With a bit of experimentation a lot of hit-and-miss clicking on buttons and icons - and some regular checking of the game manual, you'll eventually realise how the game actually operates.



But then you start asking yourself, "Is that all there is to do?"

On the world overview/strategic level, your main task is to place vassals in various parcels about the land - Knights raise troops (and you have no control over the unit types), Burghers allow for the hiring of mercenaries, Serfs feed your armies and provide labor, while the Clergy ensure the well-being of your people. However, once you've chosen your vassals, they go about their own business, leaving you very little to do other than directing armies about the map. Because of the move to real-time gaming (yes, even on the strategic level the game never pauses) far too much of Lords of the Realm III has been automated. You stare at your

Because of the move to real-time gaming far too much of Lords of the Realm III has been automated





DON'T PLAY WITH YOURSELF

Thanks to a fairly standard multiplayer mode, far more interesting and unpredictable battles are possible by pitting yourself against other human players. It's really the only way around the mindless and repetitive battles in the single player campaigns. Playable over LAN or the Internet for up to 8 players, there are no real surprises here other than what your darstardly opponents may have in store for you. Oo-er!

computer monitor and worry that you're missing something. But you're not. This game has been critically oversimplified.

As for the combat (if you'd rather stare at your strategic map for a few more hours and fiddle with the menus, the AI plays out the combat for you too), you'll find that it's a rather bland affair. In comparison to Medieval Total War's epic battles, for instance, Lords of the Realm III comes off as a pitiful imitation. Castle sieges are uneventful (the enemy always just sits and waits for you to breach the walls), and battles out in the open are never tactically rewarding - units just seem to merge together in a mess.

Our final gripe is with the overall pace of the game. Everything is just so goddamn slow! Armies move about the main map at such a snail's pace that you'll be able to go and cook yourself dinner (as I actually did) while you're waiting for a unit to get to its destination. It seems that Impressions answer to the problem of going from turn-based to real-time was just to make the game time pass reaaaalllly slloooowwwly.

Very disappointing.

Eliot Fish

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 800MHz 128MB RAM (Win 98/ME) 256MB RAM (WinXP/2000) Video card that supports DXT compression

WANT

PIV 1.5Ghz 256MB RAM or more 32MB DX9 video card

MULTIPLAYER

res -

ONLINE

view.lords.org Lords. Yes, it's the home of cricket. There's a secretary job going, actually..

RATING



OVERALL Sleep-inducing





Developer: Ascaron ■ Publisher: Ascaron ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 800MHz 128MR RAM 32MB video card Win98SE or above

WANT

PIII 1.5Ghz 256MB RAM 64MB video card Win XP

MULTIPLAYER

ONLINE

The Internet Sacred Texts Archive, I never 'Women' qualified as sacred texts..

RATING



OVERALL Diablo 3 without the

polish? Something

he Diablo phenomenon is one that continues to perplex half the gaming population to this day. Arguably, the game contained very little actual gameplay, but it succeeded in disguising the player's limited interaction with tasty graphics and an illusion of exploration. It was all about brainless adventure hacking boldly where no adventurer had hacked before. Now, in 2004, we have a successor to this style of gaming experience - Sacred.

Thar Be Dragons Over Yonder

Sacred expands upon the limited Diablo concept in every way a contemporary PC game should. The world is ten times larger, the cast of beasties more varied, and the sub-quests stack up in your log book until it looks like the ultimate adventurer's shopping list. In many ways, it's probably exactly how a Diablo fan would choose to expand upon their beloved Blizzard romp. You can even ride a horse and trample puny goblins like bugs. However, the mindless combat remains largely the same. So start lubing up that index finger.

Whilst an attempt has been made to make the combat slightly more involved than just holding down the left mouse

button, the special abilities and combos only result in having to hold down the right mouse button instead. But the thrill of the adventure is still here, and it's largely due to Sacred's incredibly detailed gameworld.

The choice of character class at the beginning of the game is a good indication of how much more ambitious and thoughtful Sacred is in comparison to its 1996 inspiration. You may elect to be a seductive Vampiress - noble female knight by day and demonic blood-sucker by night; a magical Battle-mage; the handto-hand expert Dark Elf; a Wood Elf archer: the Seraphim: or trudge your way through as a reliable human Gladiator. Each has unique combat abilities and special combos, and each will start the game in a different location and under very different circumstances. The Gladiator, for instance, proves his worth in an arena, whilst the Vampiress arises from her coffin on the other side of the gameworld and lurches out into the surrounding forest.

Whilst each character class gets dragged into the same main story quest, the majority of your time is spent completing hundreds of sub-quests, erasing that damned fog of war on the



ELF NEEDS PATCH, BADLY

Sacred reminds us a little bit of Fallout in the way you can rack up sub-guests - some of a very humourous nature, such as rescuing a bunny rabbit or returning a computer game to a bored villager. Unfortunately, Sacred is also as buggy as Fallout was when it was first released. There are already a number of patches out, so get them before you realise you can't complete quest X, or vou start pulling your hair out because your character keeps glitching out as you frantically click your mouse button at bad guys.

map and levelling up your character so they can do cool things to unfortunate creatures.

What will also impress is how well fleshed-out the world of Sacred is. There are two levels of zoom on the game camera, allowing you to get right up close to the detailed characters and extremely good-looking rendered environments so you can appreciate the work that went into designing it all. You'll also marvel at the huge world map of Ancaria after you explore for hours and realise you've only revealed 5 percent of it. Oh and bijijig dragons? Yes indeed.

But it all comes down to this: If Diablo didn't entertain you, then Sacred won't do a damned thing for you either. The game mechanics are largely the same. If, however, you do get off on exploring an easy-on-the-eyes fantasy world with plenty of secrets to uncover, Sacred will keep you very well entertained for as long as it takes to get sick of it.

Eliot Fish



Developer: Human Head ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

or some reason, the Western has never been given the treatment in gaming some of us here at PCPP think it deserves. Western FPSs seem among the most obvious of game concepts, yet apart from a very few notable exceptions (LucasArts' Outlaws for one) this genre has been largely ignored.

Human Head has therefore stepped into the breach to make an honest fist of a Western with Dead Man's Hand. The developer has taken a fairly standard 3D engine, beefed it a little with some ragdoll physics, and then attempted to spice the whole thing up with a few fairly innovative ideas. The aim, clearly, is to make more than just another shooter. So, success? Or is Dead Man's Hand all thumbs?

One off the wrist

Briefly then, some background. The player takes the role of El Tejon, one-time member of fearsome outlaw gang The Nine and now victim of vicious backshooting and general betrayal. Rather than learning from his past and moving forward, El Tejon is obsessed with exacting murderous revenge on each of

POKE HER!

One bizarre but interesting feature of the game is the game of poker played at the beginning of each mission. Floating cards appear inexplicably in the air and the player must attempt to gain a winning hand. No money is at risk, but if the player wins they get bonus ammo, or power added to their power bar. It's a little disappointing actually - the concept of the poker is cool, but like almost everything in this game, the actual execution is pretty average.





the nine and any poor bastard who dares ride with them.

So off we go, breaking out of a Mexican prison in the middle of yet another revolution, then it's on to the ghost town to fight a guy called Sanchez and believe me, in Westerns, there's always a guy called Sanchez. More predictable Western tomfoolery follows.

It might all sound pretty staid to you at this point, and the engine itself does little to set the game apart from its contemporaries. Human Head was responsible for Rune, which in many ways is exactly like Dead Man's Hand - an FPS that sort of breaks halfway out of the mold, then settles back into mediocrity after stretching its legs with a few clever ideas.

Dead Man's Hand uses an updated Rune engine with better physics so it's now possible to shoot dangling signs, barrels and inexplicable watermelons which seem unaccountably plentiful in the middle of a New Mexican desert.

In fact, it's in the player's interest to shoot as many inanimate objects as possible, because clever gunplay earns the player points, and these points go toward charging the player's power bar, which in turn increases their ability to deal death.

Similarly, shooting enemies in different ways leads to different scores being awarded. Head shots are passe in this game - it's all about hat shots. Shoot the hat off a man's head and you are the very definition of Mr Cool. Similarly, shoot overhead barrels to get an anvil icon representing a crush-kill, or flame kill, or multi-kill a-la Quake 3's "Excellent!" accolade. It all helps to add to the otherwise kinda bland gameplay.

Ma Palmer

Dead Man's Hand's real failing is that behind the facade of innovation you will find little more than a somewhat substandard shooter. The enemies lack variety, the scripted events are heavily scripted indeed, the levels are very linear and despite the exploding barrels and hurricane lamps you can shoot out, the game world seems hardly interactive. Nine out of ten meticulously detailed doors, for instance, simply don't open.

The textures are fairly detailed and stay pretty at higher resolutions but the game looks and plays too much like the original Unreal for my liking. There's a multiplayer mode, but all the game types are utterly typical except Posse, where you and your mates must face a gauntlet of "increasingly sinister" Al foes.

A welcome diversion from a glut of WW2 shooters, but Dead Man's Hand does little to win over its audience. A good attempt, but nothing remarkable.

Anthony Fordham

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-800 256MB RAM 32MB Video card 2GB HDD

WANT

P4-1GHz+ 256MB RAM 64MB Video card 2GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

es

ONLINE

deadmaneating.blog snot.com

If you were on death row what would your last meal be? What? You haven't thought about this?

RATING



OVERALL

An honest attempt to do something different with FPS, but still rather average

72



Developer: 1C ■ Publisher: Ubisoft ■ Distributor: Ubisoft ■ Price: \$29.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

512MB DirectX 9 compatible

WANT

2.4GHz CPU **1GB RAM** RADEON 9700 or

MULTIPLAYER

ONLINE

A plane that has its own society. Damn flight geeks are strange.



Two words: Spitfire

w hat makes for a good expansion pack?" is a question that mankind has struggled long and hard with ever since the first Sims add-on hit K-Mart shelves. Obviously a wealth of new content is high on the list of required goodies, but there's also something else that helps to make an expansion a must-have accessory. If the expansion pack doesn't remedy any of the major problems that may have existed in the original game, we're not going to be too happy. It's for this reason that the recent Athena Sword expansion pack didn't rate highly; sure it had oodles of new guns and more new maps than a cartographer's shop, but it didn't fix the pressing issues of the lagtastic netcode and brain-dead AI. This month we've got another expansion pack from Ubisoft in the form of the Ace Expansion Pack for the acclaimed IL2: Forgotten Battles - does it cover these two important bases and thus succeed as an expansion pack?

Many would argue that the original Forgotten Battles was near perfect, so it's pretty easy for this expansion pack to fix up the few minor remaining problems. Then again, the flight sim community is renowned for being chock full of pathetically anal gits who will complain about anything, while believing they're an expert on everything, so there are those who think FB contains inexcusable flaws. These people will probably be disappointed

WORD TO THE WISE

Point the nose of the P38 down and you'll find it has a nasty habit of shaking itself to pieces as you exceed the maximum safe airspeed. Ahhh, so that's what those air brake thingies are - learn to use them if you don't want to ride the silk elevator home.

that there aren't any major changes in the physics models and artificial intelligence. The AI has been tweaked a little, but it's not as if it has suddenly evolved a few rungs up the intelligent life form ladder, and all of the little glitches (including the buggiest sound engine seen this side of a roach simulator) appear to have been fixed. Whether this is because of the latest patch or the expansion pack is hard to determine.

Go West

Dynamic campaigns aren't anything new to the FB series, but being able to blow your mates away in them certainly is. Unfortunately the missions that are generated by the new online campaign generator seem a little simplistic, lacking the atmosphere of handcrafted missions. Also, for your pals to fly these campaigns with you they'll need the Aces Expansion Pack installed, even if you're not utilising any of the new resources (planes or maps).

No points for guessing that this pack includes new aircraft, and finally we get to fly some of the more famous Western aircraft of WWII. The beloved Spitfire is now ready for take off, as well as the gorgeous P38, allowing gamers to scream "Tally Ho Chaps!" in a shonky pommy accent without ruining the sense of realism. There are several other new flyable aircraft included, such as the Mistrel, Me-163 and around fifteen other birds, but most gamers will simply appreciate the Spitfire and Lightning, which are worth the asking price alone. As per usual these are rendered to an amazing level of detail. New planes wouldn't be much good without new maps to fly them over, so the inclusion of a few Normandy maps as well as a Pacific theatre map are more than welcome.

There's a slight problem though. Where are the new campaigns to use these maps





and Western aircraft? After digging through the game menu and visiting the community forums, I finally found them. They're in Battle Over Europe, a different expansion pack that is sold by a third party developer. Bizarre. We've been given these new goodies that finally allow us to bring the IL2 series to the European theatre, but a campaign utilising them isn't included in the game. A few usercreated campaigns are starting to spring up, but the lack of these within the expansion pack is absolutely baffling.

If you're an online flyer, AEP is crucial, as most servers are now running this pack, and you'll be able to utilise the new western aircraft without having to build your own campaigns. However, if you're only concerned with flying solo you'll have to become intimate with the mission builder tool, which is a disappointment.

Bennett Ring



Developer: Media Mobsters ■ Publisher: Whiptail Interactive ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M ■ Available: Now

ust so there's no confusion, Gangland is really just a Real Time Strategy game. On the box, the game purports to be a combination of RTS, RPG and Sim, but gee they were taking a few liberties in the marketing department that day. Following their example, you could say Far Cry was an RTS - you do have to think strategically in real time, right? Or that The Sims was an RPG - you can create yourself in the game and then get a job and learn new skills. Right? Well, no. It would be misleading to say any of those things. So when you read on the Gangland box that the game combines RTS, RPG and Sim, you should suck back that salty granule and heed our first warning.

The confusion begins when you launch Gangland for the very first time. You're thrust into a mess of a main menu that takes a minute or two to decipher before you figure out how to simply start a single player campaign. Then the confusion gets worse, as your character, Mario, is dumped in the heart of Paradise City on the flimsy premise that you've come seeking revenge on your

SAVE ME FROM ALL THIS

If you've ended up with a copy of Gangland, then go and get the Save Game patch immediately. Out of the box, the game doesn't save until you complete entire conquests, meaning that dying at the end of 2-3 hours of play can mean having to start from the beginning again. Oh, and some of the missions are timed, so there's hardly any room for error! Was this game even put through any kind of play testing before it was shipped? Seriously, Gangland is a nightmare without this patch. Download it from www.whiptailinteractive.com!





The main meat of the gameplay a nightmare of babysitting units and endless camera adjustment

brothers. You follow a few prompts, but you end up clicking all over the screen, pushing lots of keys, right-clicking here, left-clicking there, just trying to figure out exactly how the game operates and how basic controls function. Then it dawns on you that Gangland is one of those games that requires you to read the entire 72 page manual to know what the hell you're meant to do, because the developer didn't think to include a tutorial. This experience pretty much sums up Gangland in a nutshell. It's confusing, it'll regularly frustrate and you'll feel that you're doing more hard work than having any actual fun with the game.

The main meat of the gameplay is a nightmare of babysitting units and endless camera adjustment. You start the game without much control over anything, but once you become a boss and start to fight for control of the city, Gangland becomes a real headache. Most of the problems with the game are a result of simple design flaws - the

interface being the biggest problem. It's just unhelpful, and you'll constantly be digging out the game manual. Vehicle implementation has also been poorly handled, and you'll be amazed that some of the early missions down single lane roads even made it into the final release of the game. You can barely control your car and space is so tight, it can be easier to reverse all the way home rather than attempt to turn the car around.

Within combat, having to keep tabs on half-a-dozen characters during a shootout is unnecessarily difficult. You need to dictate who needs to use a medkit, who needs to crouch, who needs to switch combat style - all the while rotating the camera trying to locate them and then attempting to click on the right character in a mish-mash of character models. All in real-time as you're being shot to pieces. Frankly, it's just too much of a stress, and if a game isn't fun, then really, what is the point?

Eliot Fish

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII/Athlon 600Mhz 128MB RAM 1 Gig HDD 32MB video card

WANT

P4 1.1Ghz 512MB RAM 1 Gia HDD 64MB video card

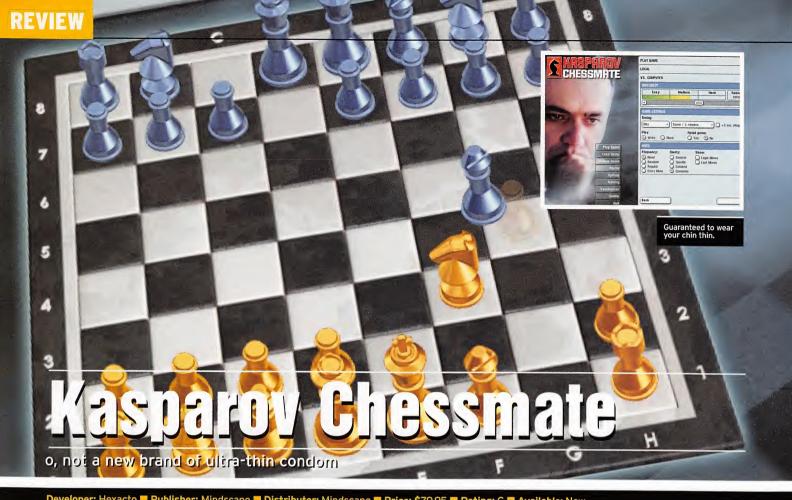
MULTIPLAYER

A far more interesting Mob life.

RATING



This copy of Gangland is now wearing a pair of



Developer: Hexacto ■ Publisher: Mindscape ■ Distributor: Mindscape ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

Pentium 266 64MR memory Video card that works 500MB HDD

WANT

Funky handheld PC running PalmOS 5 to wow all your mates

MULTIPLAYER

Hotseat and online

ONLINE

square blames Hip Hop kids taking up chess. No, really

RATING



OVERALL

Lots of Kasparov, not enough chess Still, at least it

t has come to my attention that in the public school system of our great nation, it is commonplace to label a nerd "President of the Chess Club." If you are indeed a nerd and are often accused of being "President of the Chess Club" then for God's sake don't let anyone catch you playing this game because it actually features the words "Chess Club", as in "Gary Kasparov's Chess Club for Kids Who Are Tired of Living.

As far as I can tell there are two kinds of chess player: the little kids in the back room of the school library flinging rooks and bishops at each other in an attempt to make one of the plastic pointy bits stick into their best mate's skull, and then there are dark and serious children with pale faces and troubled eyes who eventually grow up into Gary Kasparov (see boxout). Oh wait, I forgot the old dudes in New York's Central Park who play six games at once with each other and then spontaneously drop dead of senility.

Waffles

You may be able to tell from the length of the previous paragraph that there's not a hell of a lot to say about Kasparov Chessmate except for the fact that it does indeed sound like a new brand of ultrathin condom.

Chess simulators can consume your life, viz the likes of Chessmasters 2000 through 25000 which contain so much chess-related content they run the risk of collapsing into a chess-gravastar, the world's nerdiest generator of lethal gamma-ray radiation.

This doesn't really have that much content, for a chess game. There are the usual tutorial features, although the game does try to teach you how to move pieces by using pieces you haven't learned how

THE KASPAROV

The absolute minimum amount of research I did on Gary Kasparov via the interweb tells me he was born in 1897 the son of an itinerant piano tuner Nikita "Tinkle the Ivories in an Azerbaidzhani Accent" Kasparov. Gary was successfully mated with an enormous chess supercomputer called Hot Blue, and he now rules the Siberian wilderness atop a mountain made of skulls. Until he was turned into an evil cyborg king, Kasparov had never played a game of chess in his life. Now, all he can do is play chess. "Kill me," said Kasparov in a recent interview.

to move yet to illustrate its point.

The graphics are fairly bland - there are only three chess sets included, and two of them are just the standard Staunton in black and white and woodgrain. There's also a fairly blasé 'modern' set and a trad 2D set for notating games so it doesn't really count.

You can choose to play games against a computer opponent whose ability is determined along a sliding scale a-la Chessmaster. Unlike Chessmaster, higher numbers mean higher abilities, so you won't run into the problem of accidentally taking on a Labrador retriever and getting crushed in six moves.

The highest setting naturally pits you against Kasparov himself, and Kasparov is of course what the game is all about. Quite how a cheap 'n nasty chess game can claim to simulate the playing style of the world's greatest chessinator, I'm not sure, but there are plenty of pre-recorded



Kasparov games to get all awestruck over, including the famous biffos with Deep Blue and Deep Blue II.

Basically, this is a chess game for Kasparov fans. There's not a hell of a lot of chess, but there are a hell of a lot of games that Kasparov once played. For some people, that might be cool. However, you can get the same thing from a \$25 "1000 Classic Chess Games" book and a \$4.50 travelchess set from Bargain Bin. Of course, it won't run on your PDA like this will, but honestly, if you own a PDA then you really are president of the chess club. Nerd.

Anthony Fordham



Developer: Ubisoft ■ Publisher: Ubisoft ■ Distributor: Ubisoft ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

third of the way into this crime solving adventure I was forced to break into an ear shrieking tantrum! Not wise when trying to conceal your prohibited activities in an office environment but none the less this form of water torture can only be endured for so long before cracking is inevitable.

Not to say that Dark Motives is a failure, as many aspects do impress, but this is not a game that typical adventure fans will warm to simply because it isn't designed with them in mind. Instead expect this to be in the shopping baskets of mummies and daddies who know their kids have grown out of GI Joe and Barbie adventures but who aren't ready for them to tackle the worlds of GTA, Soldier of Fortune or Doom.

It was also around this time that I realised that what I thought was meticulous searching for clues was actually me just being slow. Instead I switched to random clicking all over the screen till my pointer glowed green. Not wise when even one missed clue can change the feel from an entertaining romp through the detective world to an utterly frustrating experience.

Each of the five stories is interesting and well written yet the lack of





It's all about the quick witted banter between CSI staff. Kinda like working

David: I really admire the gusto with which you approach your job. Sidle: Are you hitting on me, David? (David nods, shyly. Sidle laughs softly) Let me give you some advice. If you want to pull chicks, you've gotta get aggressive. Lose the glasses, lose the coat, grow some scruff. (Thoughtful pause.) You do get a C for cute, though.

Instead I switched to random clicking all over the screen till my pointer glowed green

within the game logic means the story telling becomes increasingly disjointed. Where it falls down, and which is common in this type of game, is that there is no sense to the direction in which the game throws you. Even though you may have reason to believe that a person has not been truthful, you are not able to requestion the suspect until an unrelated and hitherto overlooked clue has been investigated elsewhere. Any mistake can leave you stranded.

Your role within the CSI world is as a new recruit to the unit. As such each of the five cases sees you paired off with different CSI star and made to work through the stories collecting and analysing clues that lead from motives to warrant and hopefully a successful arrest. Interrogations are straightforward and instantly set you on

available when submitted to the lovely Greg, the crime scene analyst. Unlike other games in the genre there's no time limit so you don't waste time waiting for reports and leads to help you along. This assists with the flow but doesn't rectify problems with the structure of the story telling. Each case will take you between 45 minutes to an hour with the overall game able to be completed within five hours.

CSI as a brand, with almost two million people tuning in weekly within Australia, is as recognisable as any of your favourite junk foods, as such its ability to sprout. and sell, excessive amounts of merchandising and spin offs is evitable. CSI: Dark Motives is a stripped back version of a challenging adventure game that's only real appeal will be to serious fan of the TV show.

Vanessa Morgan

SYSTEM

NEED

Win 98/ME/200/XP PIII 600 MHZ 16 mb direct 0.0 video card DX9.0 650 mb free

WANT

The first season on

MULTIPLAYER

Only when you get stuck!

ONLINE

My choice Nick Stokes, with a candlestick. In the ballroom!



OVERALL

Five good stories not necessarily a good game





Developer: Panther Games ■ Publisher: Matrix Games ■ Distributor: Matrix Games ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

64MB RAM, 8MB **DirectX Video Card,** 400MB HDD

800Mhz CPU, 128MB RAM, 32MB DirectX Video Card

MULTIPLAYER

ONLINE

I'm impressed you spotted the lack of a url here

like the excellent Korsun Pocket we reviewed recently. Working once again with Matrix Games, Australian developer Panther Games has now followed up 2002's well-received Airborne Assault: Red Devils Over Arnhem with the equally impressive Airborne Assault: Highway to the Reich. The scale is much grander this time around, touching on almost every key aspect of Operation Market Garden, Montgomery's famous near-run-thing during WWII. It was an epic battle that almost changed the course of the war, and Panther has managed to create a faithful simulation underpinned by meticulous research, solid Al, a terrific combat system and a well-tuned interface.

ardcore strategy has had a bit of a

renaissance lately, heralded by

realistic and (relatively) accessible titles

Valuable

Highway to the Reich covers Market-Garden through over 30 tough scenarios that give players the chance to try their hands at everything from heavy armoured operations to large but light-scale parachute and glider tactics. Map and scenario editors are provided, which will no doubt see a host of player mods available in the future, and multiplay is supported via LAN and Internet. Given the realism and depth of many of the missions, Panther has put together a package that represents good value for money and brings decent replay value. Importantly, the missions aren't long because of unrealistically tough victory conditions or mind-numbing micromanagement - Highway to the Reich takes time because you have a lot of thinking to do.

Accuracy freaks are in for some pleasant surprises, thanks to an almost fanatical attention to detail and a first-

DETAILS, DETAILS...

Victory and defeat often hinge on the quality of information available to commanders and - more importantly their ability to process it. Highway to the Reich has an excellent Unit Info Display that makes information both available and useful. The Status Tab provides a summary of personnel, morale and capabilities; the Equipment Tab shows all equipment holdings: the Info Tab presents the unit's overall value and provides some history; the Cmdr Tab tells you all about the boss; and the Log Tab lists major events and changes in unit status. It's a terrific system, and probably the key to mastering the game - use it General!

rate command and control system. The unit icons show key information such as size, command status, type and service, but commanders can also access a wealth of additional information via the tabbed Unit Info Display. Just about everything can be checked, including strength, firepower, cohesion and morale, and players will find that they can get a great feel for the battle by mastering the simple numerical and visual clues offered by the unit icons and the Unit Info Display. It's probably the best we've seen, and a more than adequate replacement for the reams of charts and paperwork board-gamers are used to.

Armchair General

Depth is obviously important in a wargame, but it often comes at the cost of undue complexity and horribly unrealistic micro-management. Real generals don't have the time or the resources to manage the detail, leaving the implementation of their plans to subordinate commanders



captures that relationship remarkably well. A well above average Al sees units acting sensibly to do the best they can in accordance with the plan, but things don't always work out and the imposition of realistic time delays between orders and execution adds to the tension. Players manage the overall battle rather than individual fights, and the result is a far more satisfying experience than many strategy players will be used to.

Airborne Assault: Highway to the Reich is still one for serious strategy fans, but Panther has further refined a solid interface to produce a game that neatly balances realism and accessibility.

Des McNicholas

RATING



An excellent title that's very hard to







Developer: Spiderweb Software Publisher: Spiderweb Software Distributor: The Internet Price: US\$25 Rating: N/A Available: Oh boy, yes!

hat do you look for in an RPG? If you've scanned the screenshots on this page and you're still reading this review, then I'm guessing that it's more than amazing visuals that interests you. A good start. How about an original plot, likeable characters, cool weapons, powerful magic, weeks of exploration, lots of sub-questing, and plenty of chinstroking and problem solving? If all that sounds good, did you ever expect you could download it all in only 15MB?

Spiderweb Software's Jeff Vogel has been refining his idea of the shareware role-playing game over the last ten years or so. Starting out in 1994 with the epic Ultima-inspired romp, Exile, Vogel was originally only interested in making games for the much neglected Mac. He was - and in many ways still is - the epitome of the bedroom programmer. With no publisher breathing down his neck demanding better graphics or that his games be finished before Christmas, Vogel has been allowed the freedom to stick with a primitive 2D engine and infuse his games with far more important ingredients - imaginative storytelling, interesting characters and compelling questing.

The basic plot in Geneforge 2 revolves around a strange sect known as the Shapers - magic users that can shape essence into living creatures. You can choose to play as a Shaper (the meat of the combat revolves around creating your own small party of subservient creatures) or you can play as the melee-specialised Guardian or the jack-of-all-trades Agent.

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

The beauty of shareware is that you can download Geneforge 2 - yes, it really is only about 15MB - and play about a fifth of the game before you need to pay US\$25 (roughly AUS\$32) to unlock the rest of the locations. The demo gives you enough gameplay to last a few days, and I promise you'll be swiftly addicted. Upon registering your game, Spiderweb will even send you out a backup disc of the game and a cool little game manual. And just think - you're supporting one of the good guys!



Whatever you choose, you always have the ability to spend your hard-earned skill points where you please and shape your own identity along the way. Vogel's games have always allowed the player this amount of flexibilty - which is the whole point of a role-playing game, is it not? Much bigger and more cashed-up

In Geneforge 2 you can be good, evil, honourable or cruel... the choice is always yours

developers still can't seem to get their heads around this. In Geneforge 2 you can be good, evil, honourable or cruel... the choice is always yours.

As you uncover more of the mysterious land that surrounds you, you discover there are multiple warring factions fighting for control of it. As the player, you can float between each group, only committing yourself to a particular ideology when you feel the time is right. Sound familiar? There are also "Living Tools" that function as lockpicks, and skill canisters to use on your character... Looks like Jeff Vogel has been playing a bit of Deus Ex in his coffee breaks! However, these small similarities are irrelevant in the greater context of Geneforge 2's huge amount of well thought-out original content.

If you've played any of Spiderweb's games before, then you'll note that the interface has barely changed since the very first Exile game; but for very good reason - having everything on the one screen is the ultimate in userfriendliness. You also have a keyboard full of hotkeys quite literally at your fingertips. The pseudo-3D graphics may be raw and the tile-based engine outdated, but with such enjoyable NPC interactions and some pretty tough magicbased combat on hand, you pretty quickly forget about aesthetics. Some gamers might find Geneforge 2 too simplistic or quaint for their tastes, but if you grew up on PC RPGs in the 80s, you'll quite happily plug away and find yourself increasingly absorbed.

Geneforge 2 is a cool example of just how rewarding a well-made shareware game can be. Why don't you download it and find out for yourself?

Eliot Fish

SYSTEM

NEED

Windows 98 or higher DirectX 3 or later 30MB of free RAM 30MB of free HD space

WANT

More hours in the night to explore the weird and wonderful world of Geneforge 2

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

Go check out their myriad of downloadable

RATING



OVERALL

Leave your prejudices at the door and you'll find a very addictive little RPG

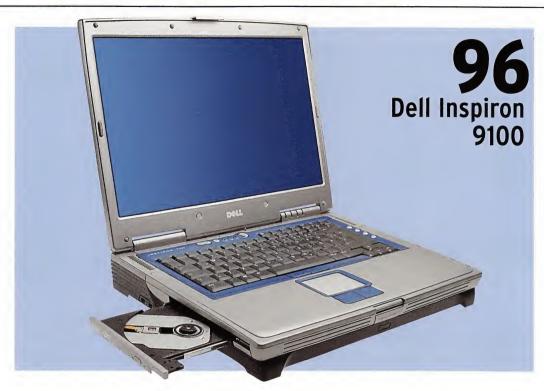
82

TECH IN REVIEW

t's a great time to be a PC gamer. Don't get me wrong, I think the consoles have their place I'm the happy owner of both a PS2 and an Xbox, and there are certain genres that just seem as if they're made to be played from the comfort of your couch. When these consoles were released they gave the PC a good run for its money in the technology race, yet over the last year or so we've seen the PC pull ahead once again. And with the release of the two new video cards from ATI and NVIDIA, the PC has well and truly evolved into a machine that is in a whole other league. Which is what PC gaming, and the upgradeable nature of the PC, is all about - being able to stay on the cutting edge of gaming technology.

If you're not interested in gaming tech at all, and care only about gameplay, the PS2, Xbox and Gamecube are ready and waiting for you. They'll keep you happy, at a much lower cost and even lower hassles. However, if you love your gameplay presented to you via the finest technology available to game developers, and aren't afraid of spending a little money to make this possible, the PC is the only place to be.

The release of these two cards has been nothing short of remarkable. Overnight our beloved PC is now twice as fast as she used to be. And after playing some of the cutting edge games on these cards, not just running benchmarks, I'm going to find it impossible to go back to the 9800XTs and 5950s of the past. Playing FarCry at 1280 x 1024 with 4X AA, at a framerate that's always over 40fps, is a breathtaking experience. In fact, it's the kind of experience that has me reaching into my back pocket to



splurge eight hundred or so bucks on one of these beauties.

If all you play is a bit of Quake 3 or CounterStrike, don't even think about it. You don't need the power on offer here folks. Besides, you'll soon be able to pick up 9800XT level performance for a mere four hundred bucks or so.

But regardless of which type of gamer you are, the release of these two cards can only mean one thing for PC gamers - more power at a lower cost. Which makes me a happy chappy.

Bennett Ring Deputy Editor, bennettr@next.com.au

- MSI XA52P SATA 89 Optical drive
- MSI DR8-A1 DVD 89 Rewriter
- 90 Prescott vs Northwood
- TFT Monitor shootout - BenQ vs Solarism
- Gigabyte GN-SLBZ201
- 92 Netgear MP101

- DVICO FusionHDTV tuner
- Creative MuVo Slim
- Dell Inspiron 9100
- ASUS P4R800-V Deluxe

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 104. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake it's all about using this hardware to make your entertainment

even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.



MSI DR8-A Internal DVD Rewriter

• Price: \$179 • Distributor: MSI www.msicomputer.com.au • URL: www.msicomputer.com.au

Pioneer and its fellow DVD+ consortium members must be well pleased. Every man and his pixel have been keeping half an eyelid pointed in the direction of the great DVD R/W format debate, waiting to see who is going to win out. Well the battle isn't over, but with the +R format capable of writing DVDs at 8x, and the DVD-R allies stagnating at 4x, an important skirmish has been won.

In case you misunderstood, this burner is capable of burning pretty much anything, including any combination of +, -, R, W, or other ASCII characters that you can cobble together. Even the High Density mode (HD-BURN) for CDR is catered for, 1400MB CDRoms anyone? But...it also burns the +R's at lightning fast 8x speeds. In real terms, this translated to 4.7 Gig, in 9 minutes, 47 seconds! The same disk took just under 15 minutes using 4x. So obviously it's not quite double the speed, but for speed demons, it's as fast as it gets.

PCPP Score

Pure value and performance make it almost perfect!

I performed the whole gamut of tasks on this unit. It ripped a 74 minute audio CD quick as a wink, and scrunched a 90 minute DVD in around 20 minutes (thanks DVD Shrink). I also exercised my legal right to 'Alcoholise' my personal game CD's without any of the incompatibility problems that can sometimes occur. I stress tested it with SiSoft Sandra, and found that it performs more like a 50x CDROM than the badged 40x claim. All while remaining quiet as a mouse, with no sign of vibration or caterwauling. In fact, it's nearly the perfect burner

SPECIFICATIONS

- 8x DVD+R writing
- · 4x DVD-R writing
- · 40x CD-R reading/writing
- Anti Bumping System shock absorption
- · Supports 99 minute disks
- Burn-Proof buffer underrun protection
- · 2 MB internal buffer

92

day upgrading my RAID drivers,

advertised. The CDR writing is

otherwise, reading and ripping

lot. And just like most of the

slightly slower than the norm, but

speeds were as good as the usual

others, it's region locked. It coped

well with all the tests and usual

software tasks, but if you were

hoping that the SATA interface

was going to boost performances,

it doesn't. Drives just aren't yet at

the point where they're busting

device does is either free up an

IDE port, or eat up one of your

the IDE barrier. So what this

to get myself arrested.

functions pretty much as

and flashing enough BIOS updates

Compatibility aside, this unit

except for two minor issues.

Issue number one, is that it's just such a bland looking device. This is the Noughties isn't it? It's got the usual LED, buttons, volume control, headphone jack, all wrapped up in the same beige design that's been with us for a decade. Some flair such as seen on MSI's SATA combo drive would be well placed.

Secondly, it showed incompatibility problems with one

of my older AMD rigs, running a 1200 Athlon chip. There's probably a slight variation in the drive's ATAPI interface that caused this. If your system is under 3 years old though, this shouldn't be a problem.

The software package includes the usual PowerDVD, Nero, and MyDVD tools, and the video editing crowd can ham it up thanks to the inclusion of ShowBiz.

Jason Brown



MSI XA52P Serial ATA Combo Drive

• Price: \$99 • Distributor: Micro-star International www.msicomputer.com.au • URL: www.msicomputer.com.au

henever I see the word 'combo', I get suspicious. My \$7.95 offerings to the Great Fried Chicken Deity have resulted in one too many tiny portions of foul fowl for me not to tread carefully. But this combo is somewhat groundbreaking, and hopefully leaves a better taste in the mouth.

This is the first Serial ATA (SATA) optical drive to cross our desks, and it's something of a happy meal, if only for a select few. This device hopes to attract the buyers by packaging a drive that both burns CD-R/W and reads DVD-ROM disks, all at a pathetically low price.

Compatibility issues could be a problem, but it's not necessarily the drive's fault. Some of the current motherboard SATA implementations just don't support optical drives. In fact as a rule of thumb, unless you have one of the Intel chipsets designed for the 3.2MHz CPU, you're out of luck. If I'd read the fine-print on the box, I wouldn't have wasted a

PCPP Score

SPECIFICATIONS

- Chipset support: Intel 848/865/875 (selected variants)
- Speed: 52x CD Read/Write 16x DVD read
- · Interface: Serial ATA
- Buffer Underrun protection: SuperLink

Looks delicious, but not one for the picky eaters.

81

SATA slots, depending on whether you're a thickshake is half empty, or half full kind of person.

Ok, so it's not fast-food but it definitely has it in the presentation department. It's actually a really, really short drive, not much longer than the diameter of a CD. Combined with the black paint job, and the truly swish detachable faceplates, this becomes one cute unit. You get three plates of all you can eat, in

beige, black and silver, and all of them attractive. It also has a slightly sturdier tray than most. Just right for holding that Jumbo Gumbo Combo with fries.

Jason Brown



3.4GHz Prescott vs 3.4GHz Northwood

• Price: n/a • Distributor: www.intel.com • URL: www.intel.com

ou could say that our initial review of the new Prescott architecture Pentium 4 was less than glowing. The same couldn't be said of the actual CPU, which ran more like a hot plate than a processor. Somehow it turned out even hotter than its Northwood Pentium 4 predecessor, the opposite of what was expected as it had moved to the smaller 0.09 micron manufacturing process. Something obviously went pear shaped in Intel's labs, but the heat woes weren't the last of its problems. Thanks to a longer pipeline, performance actually dropped below that of the Northwood, regardless of the extra large 1MB cache present on the Prescott. All of this added up to be a processor launch that was thoroughly underwhelming - no wonder the usual Intel hype machine seemed to be switched off at the time. However, we kept hearing that this performance deficit would be cleared up as frequency increased. and it appears that with the release of the 3.4GHz Prescott this CPU isn't as bad as we'd first assumed.

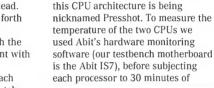
Architecturally this chip is identical to the first Prescott we reviewed, with 1MB of L2 cache. improved HyperThreading, and 13 new SSE3 instructions. The only difference is that it uses a 17X multiplier, resulting in a clock speed of 3.4GHz. Yet thanks to this small

PCPP Score

increase in performance the problem of Prescott coming second to its Northwood predecessor seems to have been fixed up, as our benchmarks demonstrate

The first test off the old benchmarking block was 3DMark03, and we swear it's not because even a blindfolded Hyper editor could run this test. What do you know, the Prescott took the early lead, outscoring the Northwood by a massive 9%. Wowsers! Ok, so it's not a massive lead, but at least it's out in front. Things didn't go quite so well in the UT2K3 [H]ard OCP CPU test, with the Northwood retaining a lead of just over 10%. Just to confuse the results even more, the performance pendulum swung back in favour of the Northwood in the Jedi Knight II test, with a 4% performance lead. Rounding off these back and forth performance results was the Comanche 4 benchmark, with the Northwood pulling out in front with a 9% lead

These results show that each CPU architecture managed to take the lead an equal amount of times. This might not sound like great news



CPU Temperatures

performance that showed it lagging

behind Northwood most of the time,

we can see that Prescott isn't all bad.

Well, until we take a look at the

temperatures. It's no wonder that

As you can see, the Prescott is great for heating up your gaming den during the cooler winter months, topping out at 80C while under load. Compare this to the relatively cool 63C of the Northwood, and it's pretty obvious to see that Prescott still has major heat issues. As a result, even though it's neck and neck with the Northwood regarding performance, we still recommend the Northwood over Prescott.

Bennett Ring

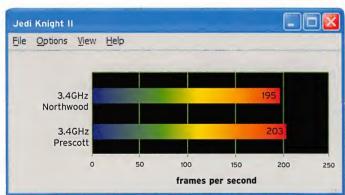


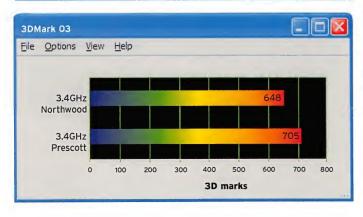
SPECIFICATIONS 1MB L2 cache

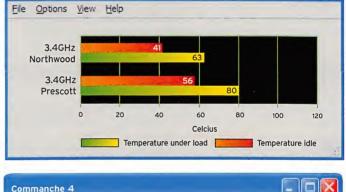
- 3.4GHz frequency
- 17X multiplier
- SSE3 support

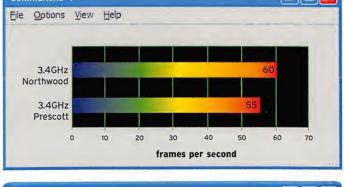
While the performance problems look set to become a thing of the past, it's still too hot.

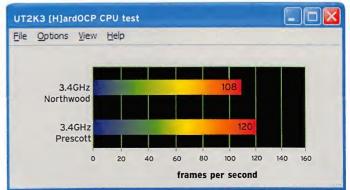












TFT Shootout

FTs and LCDs are slightly different thin-screen technologies. Short for thin film transistor, TFT is a type of LCD flat-panel display screen, in which each pixel is controlled by one or more transistors. TFT technology traditionally provides the best

resolution of all the flat-panel techniques as they produce colour images as sharp as traditional CRT displays, but it's also the most expensive. TFT screens are sometimes called active-matrix LCDs. LCD is short for liquid crystal display and these displays

utilise two sheets of polarizing material with a liquid crystal solution between them. TFTs have drawbacks with viewing angle, contrast ratio and response time, and these still need to be solved before the TFT replaces the CRT. For your potential purchase, look

for a response time of 16ms or less, wide viewing angles of around 140° +, deep luscious blacks and consistent brightness.

Stuart Calvin

Solarism LM1730S

• Price: \$799 • Distributor: solarism@bigpond.com• URL: www.solarism.com

his is a true TFT screen with a 16ms response time. The LM1730S is plain-looking and has a double-articulated foot for adjusting the up/down angle and height. Once you get this sucker adjusted for angle and height, not even an earthquake will upset it.



I'm not sure that most people will have the strength to unfold the adjustable foot out-of-the-box though! Sorry, but side location image controls are a no-no for me. Solarism highlight a feature called ABT or Advance Brightness Technology. It's a combination of an inverter control module (ICM) and a patented backlight technology. All TFTs are backlit and a good (expensive) ICM will intelligently manipulate the voltages that actually power the on/off status of the pixels. The true test of response time for a pixel is measuring from grey to off to grey again. I think this 16ms is based on white/off/white (cheating). Obviously, power control is the key to response. Don't be fooled by ABT, you get what you pay for. Solarism also states that the screen can "perform

SPECIFICATIONS

- · 17" TFT Active Matrix Panel
- Brightness: 260 cd/m2 (the new lux or lumens)
- Max. Resolution: 1280 x 1024
- Contrast Ratio: 450:1
- Response Time: 16ms Display Colours: 16.7M
- Viewing Angle: +170°
- · Pixel Frequency: 135MHz
- Weight: 4.26 Kg; Dimensions: 440x385x230mm
- Power Consumption: 50W Max, ~3W standby
- Two x 1W stereo speakers.
- Auto calibration.

on a high-end graphical level and deliver a crispy clear image". Hmm, the fonts are still fuzzy, like all TFTs. Out of the box it's too bright (you'll need sun glasses) and the colour saturation and hues are dreadful. There is no 'driver' disc and it's not true plug'n'play. I swapped the LM1730S straight in behind an Acer 19" and it would not work at 85Hz. With one

monitor, you'd wonder what you did wrong. With dual heads I was able to easily wind it back down to 75Hz on my 21" LG. It sat there dumbly playing the part of an Acer! I'd rather have some .icm inf and cat files to get it registered. and the colours right. DVDs were OK, gaming was tough, the Acer CRT colour information and fiddling just didn't work for me.

Beng FP767-12

• Price: \$889 • Distributor: Beng Australia www.beng.com.au• URL: www.beng.com.au

ight, eighty nine - this'd better be good. Again, Windows didn't 'discover' this screen but there is a driver disc. It's a nice looking unit and pleasing to the eye - only just, it's a nice piece of furniture despite



the silver plastic. Tilt angles are OK and it's easy enough to adjust the up/down view but it's not height adjustable and it will fall over if you knock it. Beng claims a 12ms response rate for this model which is what gamers are after no ghosting, blurring or bleeding in fast action scenes or fast motion video. Some games look awful at lower resolutions because the screen has to interpolate the image either side of its native resolution. Depending on the complexity of a game and its engine, it may or may not look good enough at different resolutions. Unfortunately the Benq was disappointing in this regard. A contrast ratio of 500:1 is very high and something around 400-430 is more pleasing to the eye but a true black is what you

SPECIFICATIONS

- 17" TFT Active Matrix Panel
- · Brightness: 300 cd/m2
- Max. Resolution: 1280 x 1024
- · Contrast Ratio: 500:1
- · Response Time: 12ms
- · Display Colours: 16.2M
- Viewing Angle: +140°
- Pixel Frequency: 135MHz
- · Weight: 4.5 Kg Dimension 377x405x90mm
 - · Power Consumption: 50W Max, ~3W standby
- · Two x 1W speakers
- · Kensington Lock support
- Auto calibration
- · No mute.

aim for, something with depth. Brightness can be patchy in midlevel screens such as the Beng and while I noticed it, it's something I particularly look for and it's noticeable when you place a TFT next to a quality CRT with the same game running. Colour rendering has to be excellent you don't want the colours looking something like a 12-pack of garish

eye shadow from Go-Lo. The Beng's default colour saturation, hue and luminosity were far superior to the Solarism. Much less fiddling saw superior results for colour. At this price there should be a DVI output, S-Video and some USB ports. Image controls are on the front and the "i" or intelligent calibration function works well enough.

17" TFT real estate is not cheap but the Beng is too expensive, has a poor stand and no height adjustment but the colour and brightness rendition is very good. The Solarism is plain looking, physically difficult to adjust, not plug'n'play, colours and brightness are awful and fiddly to adjust. Go Beng if you can afford it.

Gigabyte GN-WLBZ201

• Price: n/a • Distributor: Australia distributor to be announced - poor bugger • URL: www.tw.giga-byte.com

o not plug this thing in without backing up; better still, don't install it. Moreover, only purchase it if you're somewhat of a thrill seeker. The GN-WLBZ201 is a USB 'dongle' incorporating some flash memory and a wireless networking chipset. It comes in various capacities but I have no idea of the size of this particular review item because it was a little recalcitrant. To say the least.

All USB devices are fairly benign and plugging one in, even without loading drivers, should be pain-free. Win XP is sophisticated as far as new devices go and the connection of a new device shouldn't present a problem. At worst it just asks for drivers, you pop in the CD and away you go. The OEM CD with this device is useless because at least one set of software drivers is missing; don't ask me which set because I couldn't tell. The .pdf instructions are written in left handed Braille

PCPP Score

and are as complete as the infrastructure for the coming Athens games. Go to the Gigabyte website and you're confronted with an updated 8.5MB driver set and a 4.7MB instruction file. That's over 13MB of 'stuff' that should be on the CD and this is clearly not good enough. I pride myself on maintaining six XP Pro based PCs that are as stable as

SPECIFICATIONS

- Flash Memory: 32/64/ 128/256MB
- 180° 2D antenna rotation
- · USB1.1 Interface
- · Built-in chip antenna
- Frequency Band: 2.4 to 2.4840GHz
- · Direct Sequence Spread Spectrum
- IEEE802.11b (11Mbps)
- Supports 64-bit /128-bit WEP encryption
- LED Indicators
- Dimension: 126mm x 25mm x
 16mm
- · Weight: 27g
- · Operating Range: up to 91m.

//0

Aussie bedrock. Only god knows which one or two of the thousands of installed files on five PCs may be upsetting the crappy drivers for this piece of junk.

The only rig that accepted this hoary creature was my media box and it has no 3rd party programs apart from a software DVD player, NAV 2000 and Daemon Tools. Every time I plugged it in, it wanted the LAN drivers, which I didn't want to install because my Toshiba Centrino is away after

eating its fifth hard drive in less than 12 months. I thought it was an odd combination of features, so odd, that I couldn't get the thing to work. After staring at a Blue Screen of Death five times proclaiming DRIVER_IRQL_NOT_LESS_OR_EQ UAL, I gave up. This fatal halt message means faulty drivers and I'm not impressed. Meh!

Stuart Calvin



Netgear MP101

Don't listen to just me, it might work for you. It will suit some people and apparently the two of them will meet soon in a phone box near you.

• Price: \$349 • Distributor: Netgear Australia www.netgear.com.au • URL: www.netgear.com.au

his is Netgear's contribution to media entertainment 'convergence' in the home. If you don't have a spare PC laying around or already connected as a 'media rig' then the MP101 is ideal for juke-boxing. It streams and plays MP3s and Windows Media format (WMA) digital files from all of your networked PCs and Internet radio directly to a home A/V or stereo unit, in fact anything that has a pair of RCA jacks or a mini-jack. Connect an audio cable to your stereo, install the software on one networked PC, plug it into the network and you're ready to rock. Netgear's Wireless Digital Music Player's media server software (what a mouthful!) automatically finds all compatible digital music files stored in shared folders on any networked PC in your home. Then the media server software recognises your existing folder organisation by title, artist, album, genre (or whatever) and

playlist. It's compatible with 802.11b and 802.11g wireless networks and protected with hardware-based Wired Equivalent Privacy (WEP) 64-bit & 128-bit encryption security. This is the fiddly part to set up and is crucial for a WiFi network – you just have to persevere with the small onscreen display until it's done. Although compatible with the

SPECIFICATIONS

- Audio Formats: MP3 (320Kbps or VBR) and WMA 320 Kbps
- Playlists: M3U, PLS
- · Output: RCA audio jacks
- SNR: > 92 dB; stereo mini-plug
- Maximum power: 55 mW (16 Ohms)
- Network: Cable: 10/100 Mbps Ethernet, RJ-45 (auto sensing and Auto Uplink)
- Wireless: 11Mbps
- Hardware WEP 40/64-bit and 128-bit encryption
- Dimensions: 271x221x44 mm
- Weight: 0.62 kg.

A solid unit that's easy to use but setup is a little fiddly, and the lack of picture support and OSD via TV may annoy some 78

54Mbps "g" speed standard, it will only perform to the "b" standard or 11Mbps speed, which is fast enough in the real world for music playback. It doesn't support picture formats, unlike the Linksys WMA11B for example, but then it doesn't require a TV for the on-screen display (OSD). Better than the Linksys though, it looks at all networked PCs rather than just the one PC with the installed software. If you'd miss

the utility of an OSD through a TV, the ability to look into any shared folder will more than offset this irritation. Note that it says "Digital" on the box, but it's not digital output – it just feeds off digital music. The Netgeargrey metal box is ideal for a case mod – just wait until the warranty runs out though! I'm looking forward to an S-video output and picture support.

Stuart Calvin



PCPP Score



DVICO FusionHDTV DVB-T

• Price: \$249 • Distributor: Digital Now www.digitalnow.com.au • URL: www.dvico.com

n these days of plug and play this and USB that, with Windows XP banishing IRQ conflicts to a thing of the past, the DVICO FusionHDTV is a refreshing change. Just when we thought we'd never have the pleasure of manually assigning IRQs to a PCI device ever again, along comes this product to remind us of the joys of having to worry about setting up hardware.

Our first installation took place in the cramped interior of a media PC the Shuttle SB65G2 to be precise. Unfortunately, installing the FusionHDTV resulted in the video card ceasing to work correctly, as it had now decided that 800 x 600 at a meager 4-bit colour depth was good enough for its viewers. Even a Windows System Restore and graphics card driver reinstall couldn't persuade this cheeky little rogue otherwise. A quick call to the supplier resulted in the suggestion that we try moving the card to a different PCI slot, as it sounded like an IRQ conflict. Great idea... apart

PCPP Score

from the fact that the Shuttle SB65G2 only has one PCl slot. Just like many SFF PCs as a matter of fact. We're still playing email chasey with the manufacturers about how to fix this problem, but they've acknowledged that we aren't the only ones experiencing it. In the meantime we installed it a full desktop PC and it's working fine.

Once it was up and running we were most impressed by this units ability to deal with lower signal strengths. Even when the signal was as low as 70%, we still received a clear picture with none of the lego vision (blocky artefact) seen with many other players.

Picture quality was excellent and the inclusion of DxVA

acceleration means you don't need such a fast CPU if you've got a DxVA compatible video card. It's also one of the few cards available that can capture an S-Video or composite source.

Recording both SD and HD programs worked well. S/PDIF pass through. However, after recording lip synching issues would occasionally raise their ugly mistimed head, requiring a restart of the software to fix. The lack of time shifting is disappointing, and it

has to be said that the interface is also a little lacking compared to our current favourite, the Nebula.

If you don't mind a bit of IRQ tomfoolery and fiddling with arcane settings, as well as a lack of time shifting, the DVICO offers good value for money. However, if you like your products to work out of the box with a minimum of fuss, you might like to wait to see how this product's software evolves.

Bennett Ring



- · Conexant CX23881 tuner
- Composite Video and S-Video Input
- · DScaler supported
- 1x Coax Antenna/Cable Connector

When it works this is an acceptable tuner, although the software is a little rough.

70



Creative MuVo Slim

• Price: 128MB = \$269, 256MB = \$369 • Distributor: Creative www.creaf.com.au • URL: www.nomadworld.com

MP3 players? If not, why it is that player manufacturer feel compelled to disguise their players as anything but an MP3 player? We've seen lipstick lookalikes, tampon try-hards and now this counterfeit credit card.

Not that I'd know what a credit card looks like, as certain financial institutions (such as all of them) keep sending back my applications in their unopened envelopes, with a big LOL printed on the back. However, I've been told that this MP3 player is exactly the same length and height as one by those who are lucky enough to get the big thumbs up from Mr Bank Manager. It's a little bit wider though, at around 6mm, but it's still small enough to impress the girl sitting next to you on the bus. Which is really what having a slick MP3 player is all about.

Other than its waif-like dimensions, this is pretty much the same as the other Creative

MuVo's we've reviewed in the past. It's got the same easy to use menu, which gives you quick access to the equaliser and other settings. An FM radio tuner is also included, but like most mobile FM radios the reception varies according to your position, the Earth's rotation and the amount of butter you scraped on your breakfast toast. If you're stuck unmoving at your desk at work listening to it, because the girl in the cubicle next door complained about how loud you play music through the office all day (not that this has ever happened to me of course), you should find reception to be fine.

Voice recorder functionality is also provided for those who like to blackmail, and it actually works surprisingly well. Depending on whether you get the 128MB or

SPECIFICATIONS

- 55.0mm x 85.0mm x 7.0mm
- 35g
- 132x32 pixel LCD

For such a slick, small player, we're loving the small price.



256MB version, you'll be able to store up to 16 hours of voice. Music playback is exceptionally crisp, clear and cochlear shattering. Perfect.

Creative were one of the first to introduce removable rechargeable batteries in its players, and this one is no exception. So when the Lithium Ion battery carks it in a couple of years it'll be a cinch to replace, and you can purchase another battery if the 14 hours or so of

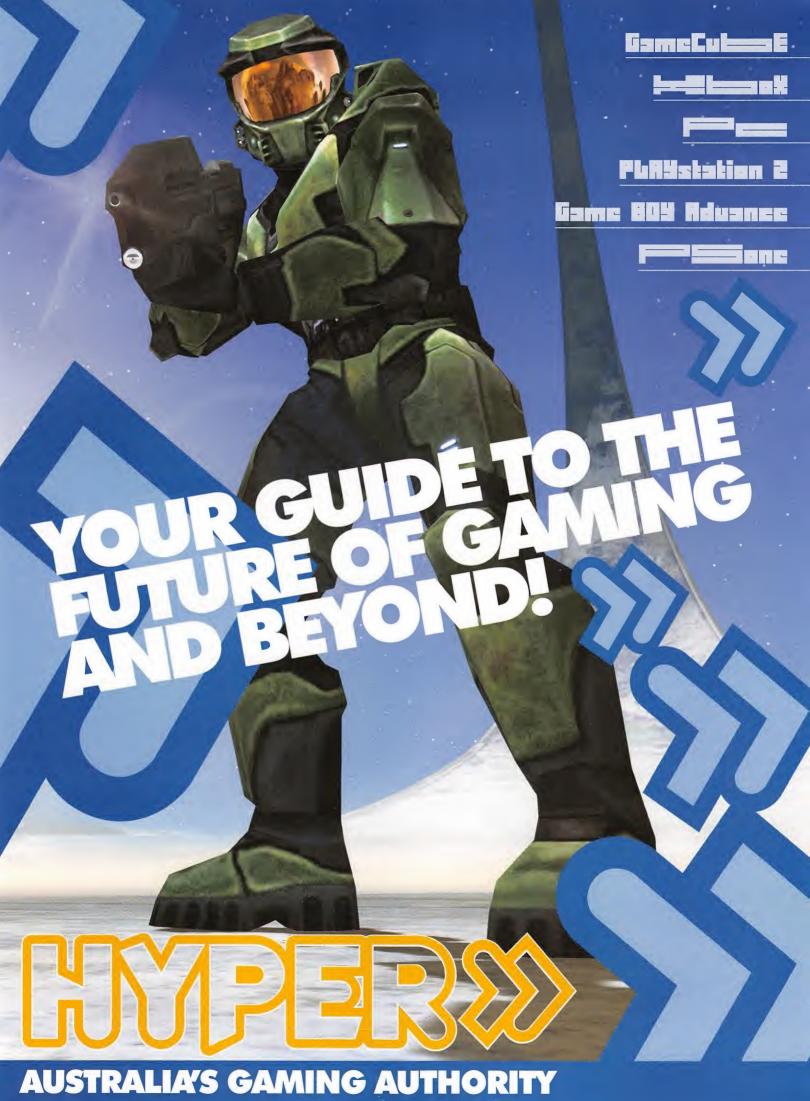
battery life from one isn't enough.
A USB 2.0 connection makes downloading a speedy process, and you won't need any software installed to do so either. Thank god.

You'd expect all of these goodies to come at a high price, but it's actually a very affordable player. What more do you need to know?

Bennett Ring



PCPP Score



Dell Inspiron 9100

• Price: \$3,999 • Distributor: Dell www.dell.com.au • URL: www.dell.com.au

first impression of this first impression of this computer could be that it's a small windowless building or a medium sized garden paver, maybe even a large flat brick in fact. The 9100 is certainly not a notebook nor would I class it as being contemporary laptop-size. It is a bit of a garden paver at just over 4 Kg but I say this to highlight the fact that it's a replacement for a desktop PC. And a fair replacement at that. However, despite its many bells and whistles it's not a gamers' machine, unless you consider yourself as a 'mobile gamer'.

For the price there are some sweet features and you get to carry it around using two arms and a leg. It has more fans and thermal apertures than any FanBoyz rig because it uses desktop components. There's no crystalwristed, custard-ankled mobile nonsense in this puppy. The AC adaptor sucks on 150 Watts of power to keep the battery pumped for all of the beefy bits, however it wants to hibernate after a millifart of inactivity and battery life sucks, but remember that it's meant to be plugged in for most use. As a result it's ideally suited to people who don't want to carry their laptop around too often, and don't want the hassle of maintaining a dedicated space for a PC.

The LCD screen is 30.25cm wide x 20.75cm tall and diagonally it's 39.25cm – this is a 15.4" screen with a 16:10 aspect ratio (good for DVD movies). Together with a monster resolution of 1900 x 1200 pixels it's actually a big piece of real estate with which to work. This is known as WUXGA resolution or

Widescreen Ultra eXtended Graphics Array. It's a very useful design for working on-screen and I'm very taken by it. The Dell 8600, (and some competing brands), is also a WUXGA design, so the look and feel is not new, but it's not often seen by the unwashed masses and probably not known to be a desirable feature. I have to say that Cossacks, Red Alert and other isotropic Real Time Strategy games looked a treat. So, it's robust, feature packed, comfortable to use, (and the grey and blue plastic is growing on me), and occasional travel is OK but there are a few features worth more detail

First let's take a great mental leap over the integrated 'subwoofer'; integrated into the battery, of all things. Let me just say that whatever they've done (and I don't want to know) it sounds better than your average laptop/notebook sound. The internal speakers are good enough to beat some tinny externals I've had over the years. There are CD/DVD control buttons so that you can start, stop, play and forward to different tracks or chapters. There are also buttons for volume and mute. The Touch Pad has left/right buttons and there are also left/right buttons close to the key board when



First impression of this computer could be that it's a small windowless building

you're using the track stick (the little knobby button between "G" and "H"). The 4x DVD burner is an NEC ND-5100A and is regarded as a quality unit. The bundled Sonic software enables you to burn data and audio with just a few clicks.

The ATi Mobility Radeon 9700 graphics adaptor is one of the fastest mobile graphics card currently available on the street. If you want to play games it does the trick nicely; you can wind up AA and AF to appreciable levels with no noticeable performance hit at 4x/4x. It's DirectX 9 compatible so HalfLife 2 wannabes should be OK. The WiFi capability includes the faster "g" standard, it works well and is easy to setup, as is the Wireless Encryption. The Bluetooth feature is nifty but this technology has a habit of stepping on anything that uses radio frequency as a transmission medium. You can connect a keyboard, a mouse, printer and many other gadgets using Bluetooth but the reality of this

PCPP Score

feature is somewhat still questionable: as soon as the neighbour powers up an electric drill, you're in trouble. Still, one can continue to look cool wearing a borg collective listening device on one's head (a sophisticated looking ear-piece) while listening to static.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- Intel HyperThreading 3.20GHz P4
- 2GB of 400MHz DDR SDRAM
- 60GB 7,200rpm HDD
- Integrated cable & 802.11 a/b/g WiFi
- Networking
- 128MB DDR RAM ATI Mobility 9700 graphics
- · 4x DVD +RW burner
- NAV 2003; 56Kb Modem
- Integrated Bluetooth technology
- Subwoofer (yes, that what the specs say)
- Four USB2.0 ports
- Digital Video Interface
- IEEE1394 FireWire
- · S-Video.



A desktop replacement of sorts: it's a brick, a fast brick, but I like it. Read the specs - gaming and homework could be fun on this.

83

Tt

Coolall Your Life

Purepower

Thermaltake Coolall Your Life

Thermaltake an party

POLO12 410W

SILENT and POWERFUL



- 3-in-1 CPU cooler application for P4, K7, K8 80x80x25mm adjustable fan speed, 1300 rpm ~ 3000 rpm
- 2 adjustable manual fan speed controls in the front and rear side of the case:
 - 1) In Front: 5.25" drive bay for 2 channel controller
 - 2) In Rear: PCI slot controller
- Intelligent cable sleeving
- 120x120x25mm PSU blue LED light fan Two Ball bearing adjustable fan speed, 1300 rpm ~ 2800 rpm
- 120x120x25mm Case Fan adjustable fan speed, 1300 rpm ~ 3000 rpm
- Dual Serial ATA (Advanced Technology Attachment) power connector
- 9 Molex connectors (4 pin)

120mm adjustable case fan



Full copper base

3-in-1 cooler with adjustable fan speed for P4/K7/K8









VOLCANO 12



HARDCANO 12



XASER CASE



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Unit 1/49 Henderson Rd, Rowville VIC 3178

Phone: +613 9763 1622 Fax: +613 9763 1677

Website: www.thermaltake.com.au E-mail: sales@thermaltake.com.au



ASUS P4R800-V Deluxe

• Price: \$199 • Distributor: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • URL: www.asus.com

am seriously considering going out and buying myself a nice new V12 Gemini. Yes, I know they don't exist yet, but once the car manufacturing industry cottons on to ATI's method of making old chips sound newer and faster, it'll only be a matter of time before you can get one. We'll see 4 cylinder cars labelled as V6's, a happy meal consisting of a single solitary cheeseburger, or a diet 'Mors' bar, that's 50% less fat, and conveniently weighs 50% less.

What began as a quirky ploy with hamstrung Radeons 8500 being passed off as a 9000 and continued with the 9200's following suite, is becoming, well, confusing. Now they may have done it again with the release of the all-new and improved integrated 9100 GPU, as part of their new motherboard chipset package. The included GPU appears to be a 9000 that's been put through a cold washing treatment for a few days, resulting in a shrunken, yet able GPU, tacked on top of a capable motherboard chipset. Excuse me while I upgrade to pen and paper, and see if there's some sense that can come from this perceived insanity.

The first and probably most important aspect of this mobo to consider is its target audience. It is designed to have everything you can possibly squeeze onto a PCB, at a very reasonable and affordable price. For example, you get an above average integrated GPU (well, compared to other implementations anyway), Gigabit LAN, 5.1 Digital output, Serial ATA interfaces, and a Firewire interface. Happily, it also features Hyperthreading support and Dual Channel memory processing for the new age, plus all the standard bits and bobs that every other board on the market offers. For the ultimate data-driven junkie, you can even use a RAID setup for your SATA drives.

There are however a couple of misleading aspects to the feature set though. For example, it advertises WiFi support, but it only includes the slot, not the allimportant WiFi card. So unless you can tune the metal coverplates to vibrate some accurate radio waves. you'll still need to spend some additional dosh. Also, the DirectX 8.1 claim is true-ish, however the vertex shading is performed via the CPU, which means the 3D performance is never going to match a decent external card.

PCPP Score

Cheap and versatile. The 9100 could become all the 'Rage'. Nyuk Nyuk.



SPECIFICATIONS

· Chipset: ATI 9100 IGP/IXP 150

on the memory slot. It's not a

killer issue, but removing an AGP

- · Memory slots: 2 Single/4 dual
- · Expansion slots: 1 x AGP 8x/4x, 5 x PCI, 1 x WiFi
- · Max. Onboard GPU memory: 128MB
- · Onboard sound: ADI AD1888 SoundMAX 6 Channel
- · Disk interface: 2 x Sata. 2 x ATA, RAID

become used to. I'd forgotten how big these full-figured guys can be-Necessity rather than virtue has reasonable use. There are several additional chips spread around the functions that would normally be handled by the Southbridge, and as a result, the board is cramped in spite of its size. It's more than just an aesthetic issue though, as the old 'AGP card ate my memory slot' problem can very easily occur on this board. Yes, if you elect to add on your own AGP video card, and there's no reason why you can't, it may cover the locking clip

I'd forgotten how big these full-figured quys can be - you could surf on this thing!

card to get to the memory bugs the heck out of me.

Performance of this board is intriguing. When compared to similar chipsets such as the Intel 865 and the various SIS implementations, it trails slightly behind in the CPU stakes. It seems that ATI still have some work to do here, but it's not a terrible performer. Where it does come up trumps though, is by beating out pretty much every other integrated graphics setup currently available. Sure the 9100 GPU is never going to compete with external AGP like the 9600 and 9800 cards, but, it is the best of the bunch if you desire what is sure to become known as 'inte-Great-ed' graphics.

Overclockability is not a huge feature of this board. It managed to take a 3.2 P4 up to 3.67Ghz, which is not very exciting, but about as good as it gets for this chip anywhere. Without the ability to lock the PCI/AGP buses, you would probably not be getting much more of an increase out of any chip. The BIOS itself is a nice. neat implementation, and offers a healthy range of voltage core adjustments, however there are a couple of the usual settings conspicuously absent. This won't bother the targeted demographic of this card, but it's just not ideal for the tweakers out there. Given

the number of BIOS revisions already available for this board, you could hope that it might become more overclocker friendly, but it's unlikely.

Stability is excellent, with a few qualifications. I threw a range of DDR at it, from PC2100 to PC3500, with interesting results. 2100 was a no-go, the CPU's suffered it, but the GPU couldn't. PC3500 chips required slightly relaxed memory settings in the BIOS for 3D acceleration to work reliably, however PC3200 RAM functioned perfectly (as should 2700), and with this configuration the setup was steady as a rock, and an absolute joy to use.

And what's a motherboard upgrade without a few freebies thrown in? Well, there's a couple with this package, but nothing truly exciting. No games, not even a Black Hawk Down sampler in sight! You do get an Intervideo suite including WinDVD, WinDVD Creator, and WinRip which confirms the home multimedia focus of this unit, plus you get the usual ASUS utilities and drivers. I personally was hoping that 100 copies of Farcry had been randomly distributed with the boards. That would have been a clever idea!

Jason Brown



GRAPHICS TO DRENCH YOUR SENSES

Get ready for the most vibrant, lifelike, and elegant graphics ever experienced on a PC. The groundbreaking new NVIDIA® GeForce™ 6800 graphics processing units (GPUs) and their revolutionary technologies power worlds where reality and fantasy meet; worlds in which new standards are set for visual realism and quality, performance, and video functionality. The GeForce 6800 GPUs deliver powerful, elegant graphics to drench your senses, immersing you in unparalleled worlds of visual effects for the ultimate PC experience.

FEATURE HIGHLIGHTS

Built for today's hottest games like Half-Life® 2 and S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Oblivion Lost

- First superscalar 16-pipe architecture supercharges gaming performance
- Full support for Microsoft® DirectX® 9.0 Shader Model 3.0 for ultra-realistic games
- Complete support for NVIDIA High-Precision
 Dynamic-Range (HPDR) technology makes graphics
 more vibrant and lifelike
- World's first on-chip video processor for unmatched video functionality
- Renowned NVIDIA compatibility and reliability ensure a no-compromise experience





Bennett Ring

PowerTools

hile it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new Pentium 64,

or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard /memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests. Actually, we used the benchmarks that competing companies both agreed upon, to help make sure our tests can't be accused of favouring one flavour of hardware over another.

Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these

applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting hardware noobs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. Check out the box below to see what components we use in our test benches.

CPU Tests 3D MarkO3 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests Aquamark 3

There ain't nothing sexier than pixel

shaders baby, and this benchmark uses a wad of DX9 shaders. You can almost hear your video card squeal in pain when running this test.

3DMark2001 SE v330

An excellent DirectX 8.1 benchmark we're still waiting for games to look this bloody good. Unlike its newer sibling, 2001SE doesn't have a reputation for being incredibly biased. We run this test at a variety of resolutions.

Halo

Considering this was a port from the NVIDIA powered Xbox, we were quite surprised to see ATI give this DX9 benchmark the thumbs up. Which is fine by us, as this is one game that will seriously test even the fastest of video cards.

[H]ardOCP Unreal **Tournament 2003 test**

Crank up the resolution and set the benchmark to High Quality mode, and you've got a test that will bring both ATI and NVIDIA products to their knees. This is also the test that we use for anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing tests.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL DDR400

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB ATA100 Hard Drive

ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard

TOPOWER 470W PSU

Mitsubishi Diamond View

2115e 21" monitor

Microsoft multimedia keyboard and optical mouse

Windows XP Professional

AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL DDR400

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB ATA100 Hard Drive

ABIT NF7-S

TOPOWER 470W PSU

Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond View 2115e 21" monitor

Microsoft multimedia keyboard

and optical mouse

Windows XP Professional

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.



www.akatech.com.au



www.corsairmicro.com



www.auspcmarket.com.au



www.intel.com











www.abit.com.tw

www.amd.com

www.seagate.com



www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au



Stuart Calvin

Decrypt

techno-speak. Here's a little of it Decrypted. Active Matrix Display: A flat-panel screen where the display is refreshed more frequently than in passive matrix displays, Active Matrix Display is based on TFT technology. The terms Active Matrix and TFT are often used

interchangeably.

Aspect Ratio: Flat-panel screens have a fixed resolution and aspect ratio. For screens with a resolution of 1280x1024 the aspect ratio is 5:4 or 1.25, which is noticeably smaller than the TV sized 4:3 (1.33) aspect ratio. Some applications may require switching to a letterboxed 1280x960, which has a 4:3 aspect ratio. Widescreen is 16:9, such as 1280 x 720, but this is rare in thin screen monitors.

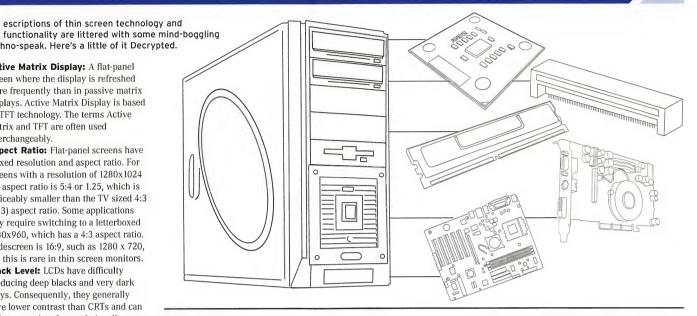
Black Level: LCDs have difficulty producing deep blacks and very dark greys. Consequently, they generally have lower contrast than CRTs and can be inappropriate for use in low-lit areas. Cd/m2: Candela per square metre. Higher is not necessarily better.

Contrast Ratio: The measurement of the difference in light intensity between the brightest white and the darkest black. A high contrast ratio such as 400:1 may represent a better colour representation on the screen monitor than a lower contrast ratio such as 150:1. CSTN: Colour Super Twist Nematic.

CSTN is based on a passive matrix which is less expensive to produce. CSTN displays offer 100ms response times, a 140 degree viewing angle and reasonable colour quality approaching TFT displays at about half the cost. Dead Pixel: (also called "stuck"). A

pixel on a flat-panel screen that remains unlit or black when it should be activated and displaying a colour. A dead pixel occurs when the transistor that activates the amount of light that shows through all three subpixels malfunctions. Dead pixels can occur in new equipment and the manufacturer will usually state how many DPs are acceptable before replacement! It's wise to demo the exact unit you want to buy before purchasing it for this reason.

DSTN: Double-Laver Supertwist Nematic. A passive matrix LCD



technology that uses two display layers to counteract the colour shifting that occurs with conventional supertwist displays.

HPA: High-Performance Addressing. A passive-matrix display technology that provides better response rates and contrast than conventional LCD displays, Although HPA displays aren't quite as crisp or fast as TFT displays, they're cheaper to produce. HPA has better response rates than CSTN. LCD: Liquid Crystal Display. These

displays utilise two sheets of polarizing material with a liquid crystal solution between them. An electric current passed through the liquid causes the crystals to align so that light cannot pass through them (polarisation). Each crystal is like a shutter, either allowing light to pass through or not.

Lux: Units of illumination. A light intensity of 1 candela produces an illumination of 1 lux at 1 metre.

Nematic: Nematic, or rather "nemato" is Greek for "thread". A nematic liquid crystal is a transparent or translucent liquid that causes the polarisation of light waves (the focusing of light in one particular plane) to change as the waves pass through the liquid. The liquid,

when fed some voltage, will take on a thread-like appearance.

Nits: From the Latin "nitere" to shine. The US physical measure of brightness. The standard unit of luminance is candela per square meter or cd/m2. The English unit is footlambert.

Passive Matrix Display: A flat-panel display comprising a grid of horizontal and vertical wires. At the intersection of each grid is an LCD element which constitutes a single pixel, either letting light through or blocking it.

Pixel Response: A manufacturer should specify the response time according to the ISO 13406-2 standard which states that LCD pixel response time is the total time it takes to turn a pixel on and off. Moreover, not the full time is taken, but the time from 10% to 90% of the total pixel luminance and then back to 10%.

Native Resolution: Each flat-panel screen has a fixed resolution format determined at the time of manufacture that cannot be changed. All other resolutions require rescaling, which generally results in significant image degradation. The native resolution in many larger flat-panel screens is 1280x1024 (SXGA) which means that

they can display 1,280 dots on each of 1,204 lines, or about 1.31 million pixels total. This can be translated into dots per inch (dpi) or pixel pitch in millimetres. 1280x1024 on a 17" TFT is a pixel pitch of about 0.265mm. Smaller is not necessarily better.

TFT: Thin Film Transistor. A type pf LCD flat-panel or thin screen. Each 'pixel' is controlled by one or more transistors.

Transistor: An electronic device that can amplify a signal or open and close a circuit. It's this ability that allows for faster (active matrix) LCD screen response rates.

Viewing Angle: LCDs have a limited viewing angle, that is from the sides, top and bottom. Generally, up to 70 from straight in front is a usable limit. Brightness, contrast and colour mixtures will vary on the viewing angle. White Saturation: The bright-end of the LCD intensity scale is easily overloaded, which leads to saturation and compression. When this happens the maximum brightness occurs before reaching the peak of the grey-scale or the brightness increases slowly near the maximum. It requires careful adjustment of the contrast level.





In association with Altech Computers

Welcome to PCPP's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness and/or level of technical knowledge.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



CPU. MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-53 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-53 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon. \$1258 www.amd.com



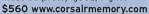
Asus SK8N

Yep, it's one incredibly expensive motherboard, but that's what you have to put up with when you want the best of the best. At least you'll know that it's of the highest quality. \$412 www.asus.com.tw



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200LL ECC Registered

The FX-51 demands only the finest in registered memory, and a Gig of the stuff for a mere \$560 is quite simply a bargain. It's Corsair as well, so it must be pretty good, right?





Zalman 7000A-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

\$79 www.zalman.co.kr



Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

\$200 www.antec-inc.com

STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Almost but not quite cheap enough for mere

mortals to own, this Sony drive will burn DVDs and



VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

XpertVision RADEON 9800XT PRO 256MB

With more onboard memory than some people's whole PC, the latest in the RADEON family will get your FSAA performance up and keep it up.

\$770 www.xpertvision.com.tw



Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including 1 Dolby 6.1 surround.

\$499 australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BRPS 16x DVD-ROM

CDs at 4X and 24X respectively - tasty!

Sony DRU510A DVD +/- R/RW

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up DVDs using your nifty writer.

\$62 www.samsung.com.au

\$299 www.sony.com.au



Logitech Z680

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these Power Award winning speakers into the ports on the back. You've never heard PC speakers like these.

\$699 www.logitech.com



2x Western Digital 74GB Raptor WD740D RAID 0

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MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Keyboards and mice don't get much snazzier



DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

17" Samsung 172x

It's might only be a 17" monitor, but it has the viewable area of a 19" CRT, at a fraction of the size. Blurring is a thing of the past due to the 12ms response time.

\$900 www.samsung.com.au



Panasonic PT-AE500E

than this delectable combo.

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Who needs a piddly monitor when this baby will throw a high resolution (1280 x 720) image 2.5m wide across the closest wall? The ultimate gaming experience.

\$3.899 www.panasonic.com.au



Antec P160

This beast of a case is perfect for a beast of a PC. A couple of temperature guages on the front make it perfect for letting you know when your system is about to explode.







MUTANT EHT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for not much outlay. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

Intel P4 2.6GHz "C"

at 3.3GHz

at 3.3GHz
Truly the most overclockable of all modern CPUs, the
2.6C can be run a staggering 700MHz over its stock
speed. With the standard Intel HSF. Now that's value. \$300 www.intel.com



An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the AI7 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again. \$195 www.abit.com.tw



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interface between you and your box of love. And it's all wireless,
making it perfect to use from the comfort of your couch.
\$257 www.microsoft.com.au



Antec TrueControl 550W

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what. \$210 www.antec-inc.com



Antec PlusView 1000AMG

An excellent pre-modded case, with more than enough fan mounts to keep your oc'd system nice and chillin'. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window. \$171 www.antec.inc.com

1GB Corsair TWINX-3200C2



Damn memory is getting cheap. Who'd have thought a year ago that you could now pick up a gig of rediculously fast DDR-RAM for a mere \$377? Not us, that's for sure. \$377 www.corsairmemory.com

XpertVision RADEON 9800XT

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800XT for a mere \$770, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is.

\$770 www.xpertvision..com.tw



Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve? \$68 www.zalman.co.kr

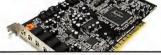


120GB Seagate IDE
The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we

\$146 www.seagate.com



Creative SB Audigy
Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost.
\$129 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6.1 6600 They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of

extraordinary speakers. \$249 australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available.

\$62 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

Wow, these things sure got cheap dight they? Burn CDs in hardly any time at all thanks to 52x writing. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't. \$59 www.samsung.com.au



19" Samsung 995 Dynaflat Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we carlt wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much. \$545 www.samsung.com.au







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AMD -Athon XP 2500+ Barton The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier \$146 www.amd.com





nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better

Antec Lanboy Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap. \$180 www.antec.inc.com



512MB Corsair PC-3200 A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market. www.corsairmemory.com

GeCube RADEON 9800 Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman. \$445 Available from





80GB Seagate IDE Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable. www.seagate.com

Creative Inspire 2500 2.1 Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic! australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable. MSUN \$62 on www.samsung.com.au

Samsung 252BRNS Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a CD-RW?

\$59 ww.samsung.com.au



SyncMaster 753S To think 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the technology of the future. \$226 www.samsung.com.au

MS Internet Value Pack Not content with owning your OS world, M\$ are now ruling the I/O roost. \$64 www.kmepc.com



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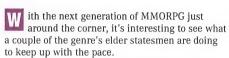
beastie value: \$1763

So, you want one of these three fine beasts? Luckily, all of these components are available at Altech Computers www.altech.com.au 02 9735 5655



Renovating EverQuest

The Old Girl's Still Kicking



Firstly, it's a looks thing. EverQuest has just launched a whole new game engine which offers a host of improvements to the graphics of the aging game. These include the addition of new textures, including tints and glows for skin; new animation, including a hieratical skeletal system; updated perpixel and dynamic lighting effects as well as newly rendered skies and better snow and rain effects. Character models show more depth and detail than ever before. The new engine also offers faster frame rates (for most users although there are still some bugs to be worked out), plus better targeting and collision detection.

Dark Age of Camelot is mirroring some of EQ's major advances in its new expansion Dark Age of







Camelot: Catacombs. If the title sounds familiar it's because EQ released an expansion called EverQuest: Lost Dungeons of Norrath. Both add new private, instanced dungeons for players to explore, which cuts down on camp farming and allows everyone a fair crack at their missions... which is a feature of many of the latest MMORPG offerings.

With Catacombs also comes a graphics update for DAoC including new character models, more detailed facial features, hairstyles, armour, and character animations.

This all serves to try make the games look more appealing than contemporaries, and, especially, in the case of EQ, to reassure gamers that just because EQ2 is just around the corner it doesn't mean EverQuest 1 will miss out on the love. Sony definitely doesn't want its faithful fans to feel that since EQ 1 isn't going to be supported anymore that they might as well jump ship to World of WarCraft

while they wait for EQ2... that could be a disaster. The second round of big news is that EQ has added a new area and with it a new, softer, stance on character death. In the past if you died because of hardware failure and you took a week to fix your PC or you bought it just before a family vacation you could kiss your favourite character goodbye. Now, after a week you can head to your handy Shadowrest Travel Agent (there are a few appropriate NPCs scattered around) and then journey into the land of the dead to retrieve decayed corpses. This move flies in the face of the EQ philosophy of punishing people for having a real life and it follows the general trend in MMORPG to move away from the harsh death penalties that tend to drive away more casual players.

In this throw-away society it's good to see that MMOG are using their biggest strength, the ability to be updated, to stay in the game.

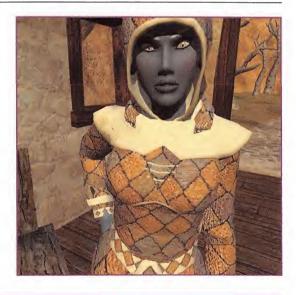
EQ2 Speaks Out Getting Vocal in MMORPGs

till on EverQuest news, it has been announced that EverQuest 2 is going to become the first massively multiplayer game to use recorded speech for all of its NPC characters. It has been reported that this full voice over treatment comes out to about 130 hours of speech, or about 70,000 lines of dialogue.

Other games like Star Wars Galaxies have had smatterings of speech in the tutorials, while both Anarchy Online and Earth & Beyond dabbled but they have nothing like this.

The voice over trailer is pretty impressive and the voice acting in it sounds really great. Listening to it actually makes you crave speech for all MMORPGs, which, you'd have to figure, is pretty much the point. There has been no mention of Unreal Tournament 2004-style text to speech options so chances are that it'll only be the NPCs that get to say their piece, which might be a bit jarring. The other issue with this is of course, that any new characters or missions will require players to download the sound files, which could start to add up, but if you're running broadband, I'm sure it will be worth it.

Keeping true to form, EQ2 is using razzle-dazzle to lure gamers into its exquisite trap.



RuneScape **Browsing Adventure**



Now before you write this game off as slides show curiosity you should know that it's a 3D game, in a 3D world, with 64,000 paying zones in the game

Not only does this game run through your web-browser, but its client-side software is that it could be the most accessible 3D MMORPG to date. There's no reason not to give

it a go.

Even at its tiny size it still features all the

world through a cunning Java game engine with 730,000 map tiles, 1080 frames of animation for monsters and players, 22,000 different scenery options with 950 different designs and a 1000 different objects to discover

spend millions to push the limits of gaming technology (even if that technology is do you have to go nuts with the big budget to make a game that's a blast



Dibbell's Play Money

Ultima for Fun and Profit

ech writer Julian Dibbell set himself the task of earning more money by selling virtual goods than he did as a writer. He wanted to be able to list selling imaginary goods as his primary source of income on his tax form, and he wanted to beat his best earnings as a writer in a month with cash he extracted from a game.

Well, he managed the first one, earning more in his yearlong experiment as an Ultima Online player than a writer and he was only \$US683 off his second goal, with his final 31 days netting him \$US 3,917. If he managed to make that each month that would come out to an average profit of \$47,000, which is more than the average earnings of US Fire Fighters, Drug Abuse Councillors and Secondary School teachers, something that was quickly pointed out by the virtual-world watching blog, Terranova.

Dibbell himself documented the whole thing on his site Play Money and it all goes to show that all those hours spent as a gamer could be good job training. On the other hand, a wise man once said that when your hobby becomes your job it's time to get a new hobby, not to mention Britannia's healthcare plan sucks.



CARS & CRIMINALS

NCSOft's E3 line-up revealed two interesting projects. One is the City of Villains expansion for their super-hero MMORPG, the other is the new persistent world of Auto Assault. The first will let players take control of evil-doers, although it has been stated that no player ever has to partake in PvP if they don't want to, while the second offers up Mad Max-style vehicular action.

MODDING UT 2004

Epic have just released the source code to its UT 2004 UnrealScript Development Environment as well as a level and mod optimisation guide. It can be downloaded from the Epic Games website.o.

Risking Your Life For Prizes

MMORPG PvP Contest







he massively multiplayer game Risk Your Life is offering the chance to win prizes for the powergaming best of the best. These go a little beyond T-shirts and mugs with such prizes as a car (Toyota Vios), motorcycle and digital camera up for grabs.

The basic idea is that when open beta starts and the current beta accounts are wiped, the players who advance through the game at the most ridiculous pace and gain the highest level

will be awarded a place in the King of RYL Grand Tournament. Once there they will battle it out in a player-versus-player free-for-all looking for the most tweaked, min/maxed and muchikin character alive.

The final round of the tournament will be held four months after the game hits open beta (which is meant to be May one so you might have to make up for lost time if you want in). The top 20 players from each game server – that's 10 per

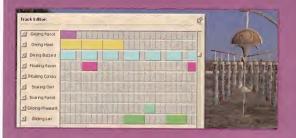
warring side – will be selected based on character level with holdings in gold being used in the case of ties.

When the contest rolls around, players outside of Malaysia and Singapore will be able to state their case to be allowed to compete from their homes, rather than trekking to the event in Kuala Lumpur.

Well I guess this is one heck of a way to check for cheating and game exploits.

Music in the Desert

Test of the Wind Song



ale in the Desert is a new direction in massively multiplayer gaming...

If you're wondering what you do all the time then the new Test of Wind Song addition will make a great example. This is the seventh test for musician/artist characters and allows players to craft their own acoustic laboratories which in turn let them create their own range of wind chimes

Once you have the chimes you can add them to a Chime Tower. This tower is really a massive musical instrument which allows players to compose their own music by combining the sounds of

all of the chimes they have installed. This is done using a sequencing program that looks a little like sound-mixing meets Final Fantasy. Naturally, once you have your tower of melodic power in place people will be able to come and rate your handicraft, with the top composers gaining the title of Oracle of Art and Music.

If you are interested in the social aspect of online gaming but are sick of 1337 dudes bagging you out for "choosing the wrong character" or rubbing your face in their power levelling, then this might be just the tale for you.

Siege

For: Battlefield 1942 ■ URL: www.planetbattlefield.com/siege/ ■ Size: 35MB ■ Score: 2/5







3D, first-person, medieval castle siege game has always been a lofty goal. Attempted many times but never perfected, we're finally at the point where technology can bring us to this high point in action gaming. Who would have thought that a mod would be one of the first to take us there? Siege is one of the more ambitious attempts to modify BF1942. Set in antiquity, the theme is one of invading and defending castles, with medieval siege weapons, knights and archers. The maps are looking fairly impressive - vast castle structures with inner and outer defensive walls, featuring destructible wall sections which can be destroyed, along with main gates and drawbridges. Of course, to assault them you've got creaking wooden catapults, ballista, battering rams and siege towers. There are also engineers who bring ladders to let your swordsmen swarm over the battlements. There are French and English teams, with classes such as swordsman, archer, polearm-carrying-guy and 'blunt' (who carry blunt weapons, not some kind of peace-pipe to pacify the enemy). Certain sides have unique weapons, such as the crossbow on the French army. The crossbow is deadly at short range, but the weight of the projectile limits its range and effectiveness firing at objects above. You can play an English vs French campaign and there are also straight conquest maps which don't involve castles. This mod is still in an early alpha stage, so there are several shortcomings. The animation is limited and there's no bot support while we experienced a rather exciting ride on a "horse", which seemed to retain all the characteristics of a stunt motorbike. We were forced to abandon it when it became adhered to the floor, orbiting madly like Homer Simpson in a fit of joy. Despite these 'mad horse disease' issues, Siege's concept really holds serious potential. This is definitely one to look out for when it goes Beta.

Ed Dawson

*Minimum monthly cost for this broadband and telephone package is \$73.45 per month [\$39.95 for starter 300MB plan and \$33.50 Optus phone line rental with 15¢ local calls]. Quoted broadband price is only available when you take an Optus local and long distance home phone service. For technical or commercial reasons, broadband is not available to all areas. Not all homes can be connected to all Optus services and will depend on customer's location. OptusNet Broadband: ^Exceeding monthly Data Allowance will see your speed limited between 20Kbps and 28.8Kbps until the first day of the next billing month. Unused Data Allowance cannot be rolled into subsequent months. Use of the service is subject to the Customer Terms and Acceptable Use Policy. See www.optus.com.au/optusnet_sfoa for details. \$300 pro-rate early disconnection fee applies. Optus reserves the right to quote for non-standard installations. A \$2.20 monthly fee applies if account is not paid by direct debit. Minimum total cost is \$628.40 for 12 months (includes \$179 installation and a \$30 direct debit rebate) plus current monthly line rental. OptusNet DSL: Minimum total cost is \$628.40 for 12 months (includes \$149 installation) plus current





Remote Strike 7.0

For: UT 2004 ■ URL: http://www.exoplayer.com/remote_strike/index.php ■ Size: 49MB ■ Score: 4/5







f you've ever been playing UT and thought that a snot-gun perhaps wasn't the best tool for tackling your opponents, this mod is for you.

Remote Strike is a mod for UT that focuses on replacing weapons. Installed as a "mutator", it replaces much of the more fanciful and quirky UT weaponry with fairly straight military hardware such as realistic-looking assault rifles and shotguns. This simplifies the offensive options in the game, making combat straightforward and considerably more tactical and deadly. You've got submachineguns, mortars, howitzers, hunting rifles and heavy support weapons - one of which fires a dirt-dissolving round which will create a small trench system, modifying the landscape. By continually firing this weapon, you can create a continuous series of trenches to the enemy base. We used it to create some cover next to a key power node. It works! Plus this kind of "taking cover" is especially relevant in this new lethality model. When you're crouching, you also now receive an accuracy bonus. Each foot soldier has much improved range and accuracy, as well as tools like laser targeting systems, tracers and fixed weapon lights.

The sniper rifle is nicely revamped, resembling the model used by the Rangers and Navy SEALs, which shows adjusters for range in the scope (although we think they're mostly just cosmetic) and bathes your target in a red lasery glow, moments before you cause them to pop like a plasticine person. Although it is only an evolution to this already great game, Remote Strike will appeal to players who prefer a harder military feel to their games and a more punishing lethality. We enjoyed it and we think you will, too.

Ed Dawson

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BOOTCHIP Online Tips and Tactics

DATTI ECICI N VICTNAM

The band played Hail to the Chief... Oooh, they point the cannon at you, yeah... Ed Dawson remembers the 'Nam like it was yesterday...



Skyhooks

You'll already know that the US choppers can pick up vehicles and drop them in useful locations (pilots use the alt-fire function). US helicopters also have the ability to lift large steel crates (in certain maps such as La Drang Valley) which act as a mobile spawn point for US forces. They're extremely visible though, so be sure to put them hidden behind some obstruction. Being as that's a pretty tough job, no wonder some teams just choose to just leave it at home base.



Glory vs Teamwork

Truly, the pivotal key to Battlefield Vietnam is tight coordination and teamwork. Combine your assaults with your fellow soldiers whenever you can. Attack simultaneously. Use the radio commands whenever you can and respond to your teammates' comms. For the ultimate in teamplay, get yourself and one of your buddies a headset mic each.



Foliage Frolics

The biggest and most obvious improvement in BFV is the new graphics engine and the foliage it can render. And it has to be said, this foliage makes quite a difference. You have many more opportunities to hide in it versus the old Battlefield engine where a player more often than not stood out as if holding a giant "shoot me!" sign.



Flag Frenzy

The speed of flag capturing in Battlefield Vietnam is accelerated with each player you have in the capture zone. Choppers with a full crew can get an easy capture by just hovering or landing briefly next to the flag. Of course, if no one stays to defend the point, it can be quickly retaken by the enemy.



Anti-air

Aircraft play a huge role in this game and talented pilots can really make life difficult for pedestrians. At the same time, the choppers and planes aren't invincible - in fact they are very vulnerable to MG fire. And in BF Vietnam, foot soldiers have better ground cover and concealment than ever before. Use a nice piece of cover like a building or shelter, pop out and empty clips into the airframe when the crew is otherwise distracted. Move around through various firing locations and make it hard for the pilot to bombard the position where they last saw the muzzle flash amongst the foliage.



One Eye on the Tickets

It's easy to get fixated on the combat and forget the objectives you're going for. There's no point carrying on a pitched battle in open ground if your enemies have nodes that are causing your team's tickets to bleed. There's always another target or another battle, which should always be leading towards the team's territory goals. Keep the big picture in mind and take note of the special conditions spelled out in the introduction text to each map, such as a requirement to hold particular points to prevent your score from bleeding. You may be winning the battle, but losing the war.



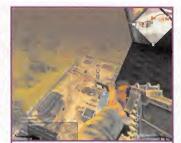
Towering Inferno

On Operation Flaming Dart (and only this map) you can destroy the airport control towers. This will deny your enemy the ability to spawn weapons or players at that point until the tower is repaired by an engineer. It takes some killing though, so C4, the mortar or a tank attack is advised.



Pull your socks up!

Playing purely for your own satisfaction, taking off solo in helicopters, abandoning your teammates on foot etc might amuse you personally for a short while. But when your team starts to get continuously whomped, have the sense to realise that maybe you've played a part in the downfall. Vehicles with a crew of many amplify the firepower no end, as well as expediting a greater force to the combat zone. It's far more fun to play together, cooperate and win!



Sniping

As a sniper, you have outrageous range and lethality, so take advantage. Very high ground can be useful, including towers, especially as most opponents won't look far above eye level. Dig in next to a tree – this will help to mask your silhouette as well as absorbing a few shots.



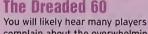
Engineers Tricky Stuff

The game is designed to give the VC and NVA forces a boost in their indirect and sneaky weapons. The mobile spawn point that the engineer can shift is the best example (but only available on certain maps). Placing this little mound of dirt in a tricky sheltered spot can mean an easy over-run of enemy positions, as your team can just "pop" out of nowhere. Bouncing Betty mines and Punji Sticks might not seem to be terribly useful, but hidden in foliage at a commonly used entry point or on lonely flags they can rack up quite a few surprise kills. They will eventually disappear, but the Punji Sticks can keep killing foes over and over until that happens. The Engineer's Mortar packs a punch, but it can be difficult to aim. You can make it vastly more accurate if a teammate spots targets with the binoculars for you. Using the secondary fire button, you get a zoomed view through which you can precisely aim the mortar rounds.



Multiplayer Options and Performance

Battlefield Vietnam has kept players on their seats in anticipation for some months. While it's undoubtedly a great game in its own right, it will bring a strong feeling of déjà vu to Desert Combat players, as it only takes a few small evolutionary steps forward from that great mod. If you're really enjoying Eve of Destruction, another free mod which deals with the Vietnam conflict, perhaps you should wait and see whether the game is patched to the satisfaction of players. The map and control point selection system is still clumsy to use, which may leave some players cold if they've been expecting a unilateral leap forward.



complain about the overwhelming power of the American M60. And to tell the truth, it does have a superior rate of fire, which can make quite a difference. To rectify this, DICE is supposedly going to balance the weapons in an upcoming patch. However, we're looking at the game as intended - the US forces were deliberately given an obvious advantage in direct firepower, counteracting the subtle abilities of the VC and NVA forces. Instead of complaining, just kill someone on the opposing team and grab their M60 kit by standing over it and pressing 'G'. There'll be plenty lying around.



It's Quiet...too Quiet

One recurring mistake teams make in this game is to capture points and then leave them un-garrisoned. Although sitting at a flag which isn't right in the action might seem boring, at least one person should stay on each point, or at least the most forward points, to counteract those lone hikers who sneak for miles cross-country to capture the unattended flags. These wily players can turn the tide of a game, so show them the error of their ways. Additionally, you can serve as a bit of a reception committee for any loaded chopper or vehicle crews that drop in, hoping to score a quick capture on the sly.



THE POPINTERVIEW

You might not have heard his name, but chances are that you've heard his work. **Timothy C. Best** talks to Inon Zur about the musical side of game development and gets a peak into a totally different job that is all about scoring games.

Gurrigulum-Vitae

Name: Inon Zur Title: Composer Company: Freelance Location: L.A., California

Projects: Shadow Ops: Red Mercury (upcoming), Syberia 2 (upcoming), Champions Of Norrath: Realms Of EverQuest, SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALS, War And Peace, Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader, Crusader Kings, Run Like Hell, Icewind Dale II, Baldur's Gate 2: Throne of Bhaal, Fallout Tactics, Star Trek: Star Fleet Command II: Empires At War, Star Trek: New Worlds, and Star Trek: Klingon Academy.

What lured you over to gaming? I was more, kind of like, taken by surprise to this world. Six or seven years ago my agent now, who I didn't know him at the time, Bob Rice, called. He'd heard my demo and asked if I wanted to write music for games and I said, "no".

And he said, "what's the matter?" and I said, "NO. Games? What games? They are like beep, beep, bop, bop ... I don't care about that."

He was smart enough to say, "why don't I send you some music from these games and you tell me?"
So he sent me some scores for Star Trek and for some other stuff and I listened to it and was like: "holy crap, what is that? Is that music for games?" If certainly showed me what was possible in quality there and I said, "alright: let's give it a try."

What makes you a good match for the games industry?

I think I am good with people; I have a good sensibility of what people what. I know how to feel people and this really makes me easy to work which is a big deal when working on a game that is very stressful and sometimes frustrating process. Then there's the other stuff ... I'm composing quite fast and I'm quite skilled with a wide variety of composing styles.

What projects do you find the most enjoyable to score? What makes a game fun for you to work on?
Well, it's composing music. For me there is nothing other than that.
I'm sure games like Klingon or Ice Wind Dale let you be really orchestral while other might prod you in a different direction... Sure, for example Fallout Tactics was totally non-orchestral and was all sound design and there's many of them that are hybrids between orchestral and

synthesised and are almost like techno. There are definitely large areas that you are moving between. Each one presents its own challenges and I like challenges.

Music is obviously very important to you, but how important do you think it is to games?

I think it's as important as all of the other components, no more, no less. I think that if you address, generally, all of the technical aspects of picture and sound and so on then you need to also address the artistic issues like music, like story-telling and like voice acting. I believe that more and more developers and publishers are aware of that and more and more COs are allowing themselves to increase the budget to achieve the better quality. Games started with very simple synthesised music and today most have budgets to record live orchestras. So we have seen it evolve, especially in the past three or four years, to the point where we're really making a movie now.

Movie makers have the luxury that they know how their film will play out. In a game it comes down to the player. From a scoring perspective how do you tackle a wildcard like that?

Okay, there are a few types of games, as you know. In some games you get into a mission and the music will start and you need to kill eight enemies ... we built it in a way that the music, itself, is made of layers, like percussion, strings, brass and synthesiser so we have total control over how we increase the intensity by adding more layers or, if there are only a few enemies, to reduce the layers making the music is really interactive with what's going. I'm composing it as a whole but then the

programmer of the game, working on our recommendations, builds it to react to any number of factors from the number of enemies to your health and so on.

The other way is that there are some games that are half scripted – like a movie – so we can predict what will happed at certain places. At these points we are definitely going to do something dramatic with the music because we know that whatever the player decides to do, he is going to get here. For him, it's going to be like, "oh cool, the music reacts," but we already know that.

Which is more exciting, a big setpiece or exploring an interactive medium?

Each game has a balance of each of those. Like a movie or a TV show each game has its own pace. Pace is being dictated by the developers, or the director or the producer, and they decide the amount of exploring, action or solving problems and all of these missions have a few factors to them. Each game has its own pace. You, as a composer, really have to have a good feel for the game in order to set the right mood for each scene or level.

Are there any techniques that you use to visualise what a sequence needs?

The experience of playing plays a big role and when you see something, when you are trained, then musical things just come to mind ... so there is no specific technique how to make a scene work.

The most important thing – for me at least – is thinking about emotions. When I started working with the developers of the latest game, since there is a lot of action, I said to them, instead of trying to play the action you should aim more towards the player's

emotions. Am I scared now? Do I feel heroic now? Do I feel subdued now? Then play to that. It's just been proven to work better.

What is the biggest challenge of scoring a game?

To be able to capture the mood of the game and to help the gamer to gain the emotion and identify the hero that he is playing, put him in the reality of the game but to stay out of his way ... basically, be there, doing the job but not be too noticeable and distract the gamer in what he is doing. That is a huge challenge. How do you do something that is great and memorable, that will of the quality but not be that noticeable so that people will be too distracted when they are playing?

So you don't want people to say that "I loved your music so much that I kept dying"...

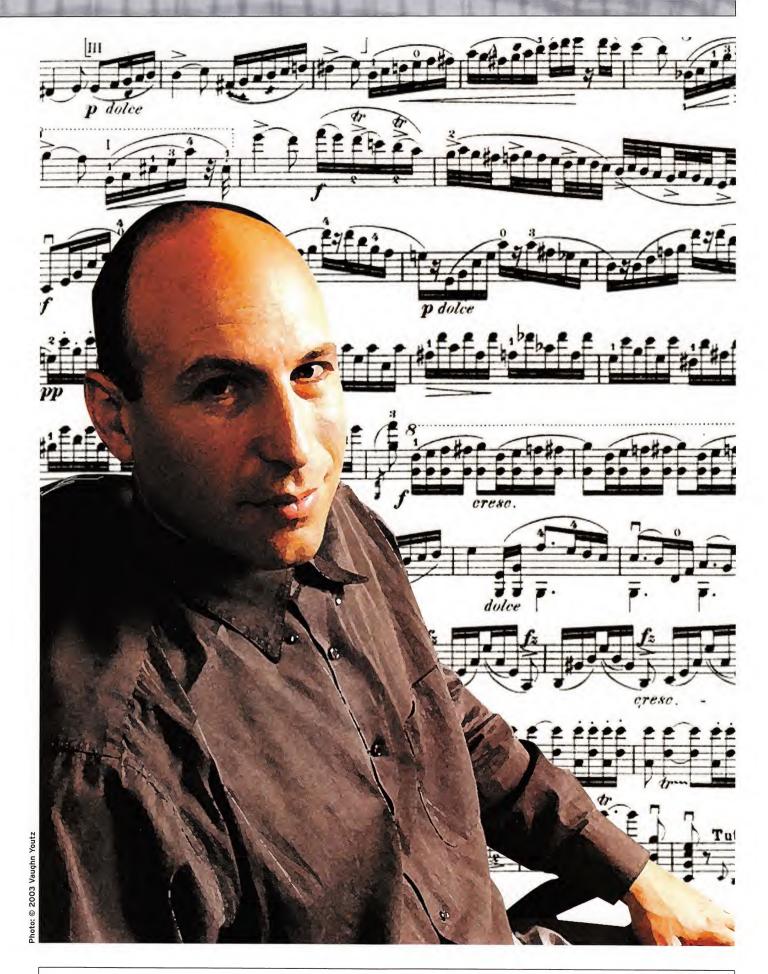
Exactly. I think that this same challenge is applied to a movie. How do you create a memorable score that will not interfere with the viewer enjoying the whole? We're talking about an art object that is built from many components so nothing should stand out because otherwise you throw out the whole balance.

Looking to the future of the art, is the next step of interactivity including music design as a part of the game?

We thought about that stuff but we don't want to give the gamers too much choice when it came to the music. As far as I'm concerned on and off, volume down, volume up is enough. I don't think that the gamers should choose too much ... in the beginning I thought, "wow, it's going to be nice to have real interactive music," meaning that the gamer will, you know, choose, his or her music for the game. I don't think it will come this far. Hard to know but I don't think so.

Is there anything else that you'd like to sav?

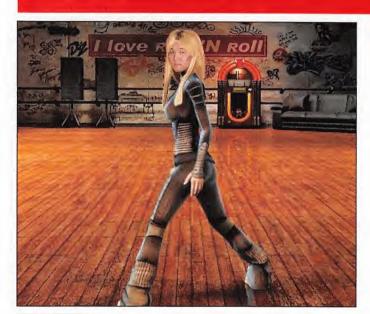
There's one thing that I love about this industry is everybody is involved in the creative process of a game is 100% passionate about it. You know, not matter how many hours they put in, they are passionate about what they are doing. This is the only way – as far as I'm concerned – to make something that is a good product and a selling product from an artistic point of view... to give your heart. It's one of things I didn't really see in the TV industry but its something that I see in the gaming industry and it's great.



REOUESTS

We welcome requests so please forward your requests to Disc Producer Amos Hong via email at cdgod@next.com.au or write to PCPP DVD Requests, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016





his month we have all sorts of great stuff included on the disc. There's a FREE game, another episode of anime and heaps of demos, trailers, patches and mods. There should be enough here to keep you occupied until the next issue of PC PowerPlay.
This month in Spotlight we have

an episode of Galaxy Angel. Follow the adventures of the Angel Brigade as they try to find the relics known as "Lost Technology". For all readers of PC PowerPlay, we have for you a FREE copy of Elder Scrolls: Arena. There is also a demo of the deadly Hitman: Contracts. Also check out the two Half-Life 2 movies "Striders" and "Coastline" in the trailers section. There's also some raunchy action in the Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude gameplay movie.
The Demos section has a couple

of great demos to try out. There's some serious race driving with the Colin McRae Rally and V8 Supercars 2 multiplayer demos. Fans of strategy games can try out Battle Mages and Spartan, while sports game lovers will surely enjoy the fast paced soccer action of UEFA Euro 2004.

The Mods area this month has three mods for three different games. Half-Life fans can try out the new Half-Life Rally mod, Battlefield: 1942 fans can enjoy the Siege mod and gamers who enjoy UT 2004 can try out Remote Strike 7.0.

The Bunker as always has heaps and heaps of great maps for your favourite classic games, as well as hundreds of wallpapers, screensavers and tunes for all to enjoy. Thanks ROM.

That's all from me this month, 'till next time!

> Amos Hong Disc Master cdgod@next.com.au

DVD CONTENTS

SPOTLIGHT/MOVIES

Galaxy Angel [DVD Episodes] Elder Scrolls: Arena [Free Game] **Hitman: Contracts TRAILERS**

Catwoman

Counter-strike: Condition Zero EverQuest II Hitman: Contracts



Half Life 2 "Coastline" Half Life 2 "Striders" Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude The LotR: The Battle for Middle-earth Men of Valor ShellShock: Nam '67 Shrek 2 SuperPower 2 Star Wars: Battlefront DEMOS

Battle Mages Colin McRae Rally MP Dark Horizons: Lore





Etherlords II UEFA Euro 2004 Geneforge 2 Neighbours From Hell 2 Painkiller Perimeter Rise of Nations: Thrones and Patriots Skools Out Spartan V8 Supercars 2 MP Virtual Skipper 3 Warlords Battlecry 3

Half-Life Rally Beta 1.0 [HL] Remote Strike 7.0 [UT2004] Siege v0.32 [BF:1942]



PATCHES

Call of Duty v1.4 CSI: Dark Motives v1.01 Operation Flashpoint: Resistance v1.96 Sacred v1.66 Pandora Tomorrow Update v1.1 Uru: Ages Beyond Myst Add-on To Díni X2: The Threat v1.2 X2: The Threat Retall v1.3

BUNKER

Heaps more wallpaper, free games, Winamp skins, map packs and addon files for all your favourite games. Come get some!

WinZip 9.0 - s

Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 4.4 8.0 - f DivX Player (with DivX Codec) nVidia ForceWare International Graphics Driver 56.72 - f Windows Media Player 9 - f Winamp 5.03 - f WinRAR 3.3 - s



CD CONTENTS

CD₁ **DEMOS**

Elder Scrolls: Arena [Free Game] Geneforge 2 Dark Horizons: Lore

Palnkiller

Rise of Nations: Thrones and **Patriots**

VIrtual Skipper 3

TRAILERS

Half Life 2 "Coastline" Half Life 2 "Striders"



CD 2 **DEMOS**

UEFA Euro 2004 **Hitman: Contracts** Skools Out V8 Supercars 2 MP

PATCHES

Call of Duty v1.4 CSI: Dark Motives v1.01 Sacred v1.66 S C: Pandora Tomorrow Update v1.1 X2: The Threat v1.2 X2: The Threat Retail v1.3



MODS

Half-Life Rally Beta 1.0 [HL] Remote Strike 7.0 [UT2004] UTILITIES

Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 4.4 8.0 - f nVidia ForceWare International Graphics Driver 56.72 - f Winamp 5.03 - f

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the new \$12,000 Beast by subscribing this month...

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TURN TO PAGE 48!

Panasonic



The Fall of Victor Ninox

Because nothing very interesting happened to me this month

onstant readers may have detected a cyclic nature to the subject matter of this column. For a few issues in a row, I'll cover the latest crackpot ideas to pop up in the independent Australian game development community, then I'll report on one of the many independent gaming festivals that are held each month across the country, and eventually, when nothing much seems to be happening in the industry, I'll harp on about my ex-girlfriend.

I did see some games in development this month, but none of them seemed worthy of a full 1000 words. There was Barbarian Axe Fight 3D, which I mentioned briefly a couple of issues ago. Then, there was a remake of that classic 1993 title Blake Stone. Finally, I saw a shrimp husbandry simulator that involved a lot of sitting around staring at glass beakers with nothing in them except tiny transparent critters with evil, black beady little eyes. I had nightmares about

And it was as I lurched upright in bed covered in sweat and screaming that I remembered what life had been like when Victor Ninox, my crazy ex-third flatmate, had only been my crazy third flatmate, and how he had eventually been convinced - nay, coerced - into leaving and gaining that fateful prefix 'ex'.

See, originally Vic had just been my flatmate. Then, a finance journalist named Albert had answered our desperate ad taped to a telegraph pole on Glebe Point road, turned up with a futon, an expensive stereo and an iMac and had locked himself in his room for fifteen months. We presumed he went to work each day, but we never saw him, and the door was always double-bolted.

Because of this enigmatic lifestyle, Albert became The Flatmate, and Vic somehow found himself shunted to the position of second flatmate. Thing was, I got to assign the labels because the basement apartment we lived in actually belonged to a relative of mine, a sort of distant grand aunt. She lived upstairs in the Big House, which we were under instructions to never even approach, let alone knock on the door of. Occasionally, we heard her shifting heavy furniture, grunting and making noises like an old steam-powered mangle. Which, coincidentally, is how my father used to refer to her: that old steam-powered mangle.

So Vic was my second flatmate, absent Albert was The Flatmate, and then I made the critical mistake of going out to Newtown one Saturday night and meeting Winona, who constant readers know of as The Girl. We fell in love, or at least I fell in love, and Winona seemed to think a semi-failed games journalist had a sort of derelict chic about him (she was from the North Shore) and so she moved in.

Constant readers might be flipping back to the column in which I suggested I had been living with a bunch of legal and medical students in Newtown on the night I met Winona, and not with Vic and Albert after all, to which I say, stop reading so closely. Continuity is a fluid concept, man. Just look at any half-baked story-focused shooter.

Point is, the important part is, Vic found himself shunted from second flatmate to third flatmate, and he dealt with this by amassing a notinconsiderable collection of bad 80s pornography in the damp, windowless chamber we called our lounge room.

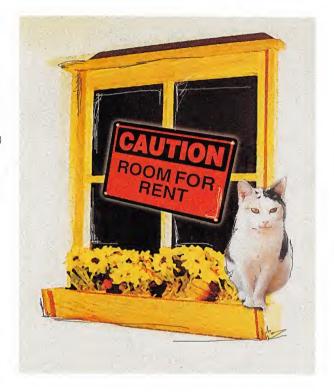
Winona and her kitten Osmosis had until that day been living in sheer luxury on the North Shore, where she and the cat had their own floor in a three-storey nouveau terrace with a bay window and everything, and she initially had a few problems learning how to adapt to a mole-like existence in a flat with no windows.

The block on which my pseudo-aunt's house had been built sloped back from the street, so the roof of our basement apartment became progressively lower as you walked from the front door (which was in my pseudo-aunt's back yard) back toward the street. The front of the flat hadn't even been completed - there was just a final room with a dirt floor, and a ragged brick wall with a hole opening onto pitch blackness and the mysteries of Sydney's byzantine sewerage system.

"I think this should be Victor's room," said Winona. Somehow, Vic agreed to move out of his only slightly dingy room and into this torture chamber of the soul. Victor's old room. meanwhile, became Osmosis' play room, because the cat was accustomed to having his own space.

You have to understand that I am writing this with the benefit of the bitterness of heartbreak. At the time, I thought Winona was a perfect angel and against all sensibilities, so did Vic. He happy dragged all his milk crates and bits of furniture he'd picked up off the side of the road into this... hole. He lived there, in perpetual twilight, for nine months. It changed him. It was a kind of gestation, the creation of a new creature from the broken husk of my friend Victor Ninox. I ran a UTP cable in there so he could get online with his cracked and wheezing Pentium 233MMX, and twenty-four hours a day of gloom and hard core pornography broke him somewhere deep inside.

Eventually, Winona got electrocuted by Vic's badly chipped PlayStation, and she insisted that Vic had to go, partly because his personal belongings had become a real OHS issue, and



also because he had given Osmosis fleas.

We called a house meeting, and held in on the patch of soggy carpet immediately outside Albert's perpetually locked door (under which a small wad of rent money would appear, once a month) in case he was in some way interested. I explained to Vic that even though he and I had lived together for the best part of five years and Winona had only been there for nine months, my responsibilities to her state of mind clearly outweighed my responsibilities to his, and twitching slightly, Vic agreed.

We offered to give him a lift somewhere, perhaps to the nearest YMCA, but he said it was okay, he had burrowed into the old abandoned tunnels that twist and curl beneath the city via the ragged hole in his front wall, and he said he would wander free and easy as a mole-person.

I asked him what he wanted us to do with his stuff, but Winona gently but firmly elbowed me in the gut to explain that we would sell of Vic's stuff in lieu of the rent she suddenly decided he owed.

And so off he went. I'll never forget the hunched shape of his greatcoated back, disappearing into the gloom. He was whistling, if you can believe it, a bright but somehow melancholy tune. I thought that would be the last I ever saw of him, but little did I know it that less than six months later, after one too many altercations with Osmosis and his precious bloody feline sensibilities, I would be following Victor into that unmentionable gloom.

Just another lost soul, deep beneath the Emerald City, unlucky in love but with a lot of games to play.











January 2004



Radeon 9 600XT Bravo Mar 2004



PowerColor ATI Radeon 9600 Pro September 2003



PowerColor ATI Radeon 9700 Pro November 2002



Radeon 9700 Pro AIW July 2003

